CORONET

Jonas Ward

The word was out –

GET BUCHANAN

GET BUCHANAN!

He began to note a slightly different tone in the baying of the hounds. He sat upon a large, round rock, rifle across his lap, six-gun in his belt. He listened. He was a man of the outdoors, of the hills and the plains and the woods and the rivers and the desert. Every sound had for him a different meaning.

The dogs were no longer coming straight up the trail toward the spot where he had just taken leave of the girl. They were shading off in his direction—yet it was absolutely impossible that they should have picked up his scent at this distance. He moved with care, cradling the rifle, shading the moonlight from his eyes with the brim of his hat. There was other game afoot.

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Buchanan Gets Tough
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Get Buchanan

Jonas Ward

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CHAPTER ONE

TOM BUCHANAN, riding the big horse, Nightshade, over the high, rugged terrain, was completely happy. Mountain peaks loomed north, south, east, and west, all radiating colors of the rainbow in the glare of early afternoon sun. On the breeze there was the smell of piñon. Every vista was peaceful.

Buchanan was a peaceable man. He weighed in the comfortable neighborhood of two hundred and forty pounds, not an ounce of which was fat. When he dismounted at a cold mountain stream and removed Nightshade's bridle so that both of them could drink, he bent from a height of six feet, four inches, to dip his sombrero into the water. He was long-legged and narrow-waisted, ruddy of complexion, with sandy hair and greenish eyes. His shoulders spanned most doorways.

Various and sundry scars decorated the countenance and body of the man, souvenirs of times when people or animals interfered with his peaceful pursuit of life upon the frontier of the West. It often took a lot of hard fighting on his part to preserve that peace.

Nightshade lapped delicately at the icy water. The big black had been through many a war with his owner. They understood one another's every move, every thought. Now they were, for the moment, most contented with this space of time.

An eagle soared overhead. Man and beast watched him make his defensive scout, then swoop down upon an aerie high above them. They looked downward and a mother puma leaped from crag to crag, a jackrabbit in her maw as she sought to feed her cubs. Bird and animal were free at this height.

Down below lay the mines, the plain—the high plain—the town, the people. The rails had not come here as yet; this was a way station of a place. The name of the town was Wagoner, and it was a settlement Buchanan had not visited in a decade.

A sandlapper himself, born of a ranch-woman mother and a lawman father, Buchanan had adopted the Southwest as his home. He had ridden over it, made friends within its boundaries, fought his battles for those friends and for causes. He had seen the nation from Canada to Mexico, from San Francisco to New York City. He had been up the rivers and across the prairies, and he had found no place he liked better than the high plains of New Mexico and Arizona and part of Texas and Colorado.

He took another deep breath and thought of some friends he would soon visit. Meanwhile, he was communing with nature and the God he worshipped in open air as near to the clouds as he could comfortably manage. He did not reckon how many thousand feet above sea level he stood; he only knew that he felt clean and good and that every prospect pleased him.

This was Apache country, which did not deter him from wandering at will. He knew the Indians, they knew him. Down below in the valley, which was also the plain, there were white men far more dangerous than the red man.

Thinking of the town of Wagoner and the people he might soon be seeing, he went to his saddlebag, rum-

maged beneath his wrapped six-gun and ammunition belt, and found his army field glasses, which he had won in a poker game. He turned them below and leisurely surveyed the scene.

There was a road, threadlike, thousands of feet down, winding between the mines, descending to reach and pass through the grama-grass flats to Wagoner. There were smelters he had not seen years ago, sending up foul fumes. He could not see the ranchland, the Flying W, where he had worked for a while ten years earlier. It was prosperous country, and it seemed to have proven itself out even after the death of founder Jack Wagoner.

He focused the glasses on a near part of the faraway road. A buggy, tiny as a toy, crept into view. There was a driver and a messenger with a long gun—rifle or shotgun—across his lap. It was a cinch this buggy was carrying money, a payroll, a large sum. It would be cash, since such a light vehicle could not support any amount of heavy bullion.

Suddenly Buchanan's glasses picked up a flicker of motion. He followed it. In the tumbled rocks bordering the winding trail antlike figures made quick movement.

Things began to happen with great speed. He could not completely follow the proceedings with the limited scope of the glasses. He knew that a solitary figure remained on a high flat rock above the action and gave directions with his hands, Indian-like. Others came in behind the carriage, taking it by surprise. The long gun was seized and smashed upon rocks.

There were four including the leader, Buchanan saw. They were young; they moved as only the lithe young could move. They went for a black suitcase, rather large, sturdy. This they flung to the man atop the rock.

Then they bound the two men in the carriage, tying hands and feet, gagging them. They led the horse, a roan, off the road and into a small glade where it could remain unseen by a casual passerby. They tied up the horse and sped back to the road. They left the men in the carriage.

Atop the rock the leader looked in all directions. He

turned and stared upward at Buchanan, who quickly lowered the field glasses lest they reflect the sun and give hint that the robbery had been observed.

The leader waved an arm, which patently meant, "We got what we want, now move out."

The others obeyed with great promptness, as though discipline held them in its grasp. The leader came down from his position above them, and Buchanan noted that he limped as though one leg was shorter than the other. Yet he moved quickly, using long, powerful arms to propel him from boulder to boulder. He was the boss, Buchanan knew beyond doubt; he had the manner.

In a jiffy the four young thieves were out of view. Their destination must be the jagged heights of the mountains, Buchanan guessed. There was a place that he remembered—but had no desire to explore single-handed. Many years ago, in the company of an old mountain man, he had stood off several hundred Indians from that place.

He restored the bit to the jaw of the happily munching Nightshade, loosened the rifle in its scabbard, and prepared to ride down the mountainside. About all he could do at the moment was release the victims of the holdup.

It was a lengthy, zigzag journey from the tall peaks, with Nightshade delicately picking his own way over shale and rolling stones. The breeze diminished, and the sun made its presence felt. Buchanan did not hurry; he would not swap Nightshade for a dozen men safely shackled in a buggy beneath shade trees.

Another memory came to him: the hidden canyon in which they had staged the battle was part of a legend. The mountain man, who had died soon thereafter, was named Costello, and rumor had it that he had found Apache gold. Many people had spent time and money—a few had spent their lives—trying to locate Costello's Digs. Buchanan, knowing Costello's predilection for whiskey and tall tales, had never believed in the legend, but it had persisted for a long time. It was a separate

place from Wagoner's Blackjack Mine, which was located near the Wagoner Flying W Ranch.

Not that any of it mattered to John Wagoner. He had long since departed this vale of tears. He had left all behind, and Buchanan wondered if his widow had managed to hang onto any of it.

He finally came to the road where the holdup had taken place. The roan was tethered to a stunted piñon tree. The sun beat down on the carriage itself where the two men, bound hand and foot and gagged with their own kerchiefs, lay back to back. Buchanan produced his Barlow and snapped open a sharp blade. He cut through the sweaty cloth of the gags and went to work on the wrists.

One of the men wore city clothing; that is, a jacket and dark trousers and walking boots. There was mine dust on the boots.

The other was short and wide and bowlegged and seemed more the horseman. Each sputtered and coughed and tried to keep from vomiting as the gags were removed.

"It sure makes a man's innards curdle," Buchanan observed. "Never could stand bein' gagged."

Both men were powerful, wide in the shoulder, long in the arm. Both had hard, callused hands. Each had a certain look about him that Buchanan recognized. They were tough, plenty tough. The shorter one, the horsey man, seemed a bit more convivial.

"Name of Happy Halow," he finally croaked. "You got a canteen on you?"

"Yeah," growled the other, bigger man. "A man could choke to death."

Buchanan finished slicing the bonds that held their hands. "Uh-huh. Only best you should have your mitts loose before you drink, seems like."

He ambled over to where Nightshade patiently waited and brought his canteen, recently filled with icy water from the mountain stream. The big man grabbed it.

The man who called himself Happy Halow said, "He's

always been a hog. Name of Patrick Prince. Runs the Wagoner Mine."

"You work for him?"

"I work for the Widow," said Happy Halow. "That is, I did. This here's the second payroll we lost. Old Pat, he thinks him and shotgun can handle anything."

"That's enough of that," bellowed Prince. He slapped the canteen into Buchanan's hand. His face was turkey red. He had peculiar, wide-spaced pale eyes. He glared. "You there, how come you to get here like o' this?"

"I ride a horse," Buchanan said mildly. He gave the canteen to Halow.

"You must've seen what happened."

"Oh, I saw it all right."

"Then why the hell didn't you chip in, give a hand?"

"I was a right smart piece away from it," said Buchanan. "Up yonder."

"You got a rifle."

"Uh-huh. It's a pretty poor weapon from the top there. Might've killed anybody. Even you. If I got the trajectory right. Which is a long shot no matter how you figure. If you can figure, that is?"

Halow turned the canteen upside down and shook out the last drop. "You can fill her in Wagoner," He said to Buchanan.

"I wanta know some more about this," Prince yelped. "I wanta know what you seen, all about it."

"Uh-huh," said Buchanan. "I saw you get slickered. I saw four quick fellas, may have been youngsters way they moved. I saw 'em move so fast you couldn't get your gun around. I saw 'em take a big black suitcase and ride into the hills. I saw one of them was lame."

"It's them again," said Prince.

"Who did you think it was, Jesse James?" Halow shrugged. "Course it was them."

Prince stomped up and down, kicking dust. "They come from behind. I'm watchin' ahead and they sneak up like Apaches."

"Smart," said Halow. He seemed to be adapting to the situation much better than Patrick Prince. "Last

time, they rolled big old rocks down on the wagon. Hit me on the head with one."

Prince stared darkly at Buchanan. "How come you seen everything so good but couldn't get down to help us out?"

"Field glasses," Buchanan said patiently. He was taller than the other man and heavier. But it still took some doing to maintain a peaceable attitude. Patrick Prince, with his staring frog eyes, was a man to make instant enemies. Halow was easier.

Halow said, "Take it easy, Pat. The man turned us a loose. He'll be goin' to town. There's plenty of time."

"I take it you gents are not for following the gang up into the hills?" Buchanan asked. "I mean, how far can they get goin' in that direction?"

"Far enough to bushwhack us," said Halow cheerfully. "Anybody would be plain dumb to follow them now. The only way to get them is to trap 'em."

"Shut up, Halow," snapped Prince. "Nobody asked you. Just keep your mouth shut."

Halow said to Buchanan, "The Widow won't like losin' another payroll. The more the Widow gets, the more she wants."

"You shut up, I said!" Prince swung around, fists clenched. Buchanan stepped between the two men, as Halow spat upon his hands and raised his fists.

Buchanan said, "Just like it always is, wherever I go. I'm havin' a nice, peaceful vacation. Then people turn up. Then it starts. Now why don't you two get into that rig and go on to town, if that's where you're goin'? I'll see you there. Wasn't goin' to Wagoner. But now I better report to the law, I reckon."

Halow snorted. "The law? Old man Pease? Sure, you do that. And then you're a cinch to report to the Widow. Which you might's well do in the first place."

"Excuse me," Buchanan said, "but are you talkin' about the widow of John Wagoner?"

"I ain't talkin' about her sister," said Halow. He untied the roan horse. Without looking at Prince he said, "If you're comin' to town with me, hop aboard.

Otherwise, walk and be damn to you."

Prince clambered into the buggy. He did not address a word of thanks to Buchanan. He settled around, hard hat upon his head, and sat with straight back, staring into space. He was a man heading for trouble, no doubt of that.

Buchanan said, "The Widow Wagoner. Tell me, is she a medium-sized lady, real quiet? Didn't she keep a nice place on the Flyin' W? Had a little boy, somethin' wrong with his leg? John worried about the boy. They sent him east for treatment? Ten, twelve years ago, this was."

Halow asked surprisedly. "You knew 'em?"

"I heard John got himself killed by a bronc just as he was doin' good with the mine and the ranch. I haven't been around these parts since then. Wasn't plannin' on stoppin'."

"You know Simon Pease, then?"

"He was a partner of John Wagoner."

"He's the town marshal now." Halow grinned. "Sober him up, he might be a good man again."

"He had a daughter. Year or two younger than the Wagoner boy. . . . Polly?"

"Polly. Runs the eatery."

"And the Widow Wagoner runs the ranch and the mine?"

"And the town. And the county, mostly."

Again Pat Prince spoke in his harsh manner. "Ain't you never gonna shut up your fat mouth?"

"Hell, what the man don't know he'll soon find out in town," said Halow. "You didn't mention your name, stranger?"

It was not a true query, and the tone was polite. Happy Halow knew his manners. Buchanan need not have answered.

"Tom Buchanan. Just ridin' through." He went toward Nightshade, aware of eyes boring into his back.

"You're Buchanan?" It was the hard voice of Prince.

"I just said so." He mounted the big black horse. Now the rifle was beneath his knee. He did not quite know

what to make of these two men, embittered by being bamboozled, the one carrying a threat in his voice, the other recklessly open.

"I heard of you."

Halow interjected, "I heard of your prizefighter. The nigger Coco Bean. He around here?"

"He's not my slave," Buchanan said. He was weary of this pair. He simply did not like them. They were not his kind of people. "We don't call him 'nigger.' He is my friend and the heavyweight champion of the west."

"I win plenty bets on him," said Halow. "Hell, I ain't prejudiced. I'd be real glad to shake his hand."

"Mighty decent of you," Buchanan said. He reined Nightshade out of the small glen and onto the road. He headed for Wagoner, going on ahead, not taking the dust of the wagon wheels into his lungs.

John Wagoner, he thought, a willful man but on the level. They had wrestled once, and Buchanan had thrown the rancher-owner all over the only saloon in town. There'd been a lot of breakage, and John had paid in utmost good nature. He had hated defeat, but he had accepted it with good grace, They had been acquintances, not close friends.

The wife's name was Rose. She had been a Mulhearn, which was a pioneer family that had not done too well. Buchanan remembered her as silent rather than reserved or quiet, sometimes smouldering when things went wrong but never interfering. She was dark, with fine feet and ankles that were remarked upon in the bunkhouse by men who were puzzled by her. She did not mingle with the women of the settlement and seldom dressed up for special accasions.

Now she was Rose Wagoner, the Widow. The reactions of the two men who had been robbed were unmistakable. They were plumb scared of her. It seemed odd.

All the way to town Buchanan had another sensation, not entirely new to him: he had the feeling that eyes were upon him. He could even sense the direction from which they were gazing. He deliberately did not look up into the hills that rolled up to the towering mountains

through which he had been traveling. It was from thence that men spied upon him as he rode to Wagoner.

He must have thrown a bit of fear into the robbers. If they had left a rear guard, as all good outlaws should, he would have been seen promptly to have released Prince and Halow. This would cause wonder and concern since they would not be certain if he had seen them, could identify them. They would now be making sure he did not trace them to their hideout, wherever it was in the hills.

They could easily pick him off with a rifle. There was not a thing to be done about that, no way to avoid it. He was heading for Wagoner and might be a great future danger to them.

He felt naked as a jaybird riding along in the sunshine. At any moment one more hunk of lead might rip into his carcass. It had happened before and most often when someone had this sort of advantage over him.

He came to a slope in the road, He was now in the midst of the high plain, a high valley, in fact. The tall, snowclad peaks of the mountains were still beclouded in the distance but there it was warm and the grama grass grew belly high to a heifer. There were cattle behind a barbed-wire fence. He could make out the Flying W brand. These were Widow Wagoner beefs, and a rider in a tasseled sombrero regarded Buchanan from beneath the wide brim with a dark suspicious gaze. The *vaquero* was armed to the teeth. He wore a knife under his arm, two pistols, a rifle in the boot at his knee.

There was, after a while, a gate. Above it was a well-lettered sign—FLYING W, NO TRESPASSING. THIS MEANS U. Buchanan had no desire to attempt this entrance to the ranch.

After passing the ranch he had no feeling of being observed. The eyes of the beholders remained in the mountain fastness, he thought. But they had remained. They had not seized the loot—considerable from the proportions of the black case—and fled the country. Furthermore, Halow had indicated that this was not their first foray upon a mine payroll. These were thieves

who remained at the source of supply, where they could strike again and again. This too was passing strange to Buchanan's long experience with holdup men and their ilk.

Now the road became straight and wide. It led directly to the outskirts of Wagoner. Buchanan reined in before an outlying squat adobe building upon which was crudely lettered ROMANO'S CANTINA. This was new, and oddly enough about the only new building that he could spot along the main street.

There was the stable, the general store, the saloon in which he had wrestled Wagoner, the small restaurant, and the tiny one-storied hotel, which consisted of six bedrooms and a lobby with a few game tables.

There were side streets, and some of these contained cabins, probably for married miners and their families. They were all poorly built, even those made of new, raw lumber. He rode slowly along Main Street. A yellow hound dog hunted fleas in the sun, and a few children played listlessly in the gutters. Otherwise there was no afternoon traffic.

The eatery bore a sign—POLLY'S PLACE. He found a sleepy-eyed black boy at the livery and gave strict instructions about Nightshade, handed over four bits to awaken the hostler, and walked over to the restaurant. He had not eaten in many hours, and he was a man with an appetite to match his girth. He opened the door and walked in out of the heat.

There were a half-dozen tables, unoccupied. The place was spotless, and good smells issued from the kitchen. From the kitchen came voices too, raised in exasperation. He dimly recognized the male voice as it complained.

"Now daughter, I ain't nowheres near drunk. Just took a lil' snort to keep my throat cleared up. The Widder wants to see me, and you know how she is."

"I know how she is." The girl's voice was fresh and scornful.

"It ain't I'm scared of her nor nothin' like o' that."

"Oh, no! No, indeed. Brave Marshal Pease of the

town of Wagoner. He ain't scared."

"Now, doggone it, that's no way to talk to your father."

"The Widow. She cheated you out of your share of the mine. She had your cattle rustled and bought out the ranch where I was born. She swindled you like she swindles every other sonofa—"

"Polly! I told you again and again not to use that kinda language. Even betwixt us two it ain't fittin. Your maw will be spinnin' in her grave."

"Ma must've been spinnin' since you first started drinkin' instead of chokin' some sense into the Black Widow!"

Buchanan had heard too much. He scraped the legs of a chair across the board floor, slapped at the dust on his trousers with his hat, and said, "Ahemmm!"

There was the sound of a closing door at the rear of the kitchen. A red-haired young woman appeared, hands on hips, cheeks flushed. She was a very tall girl, a bit too thin. She had a wide mouth and bright blue eyes. Right now she was not happy.

"We don't serve between mealtimes. Supper at six," she said shortly.

"I don't need a whole banquet," Buchanan told her. "Just came off the trail, and a bite of anything would do nicely, thank you. Least you can do for an old friend."

She squinted up at him. Her anger vanished. "Tom Buchanan! Why I haven't seen you since I was six!"

Eight," he said. "You were eight."

She strode forward, wiping a hand on her apron, offering it to him. "You were a friend to John Wagoner."

"Yeah, we knew each other pretty good."

"You whupped him in the saloon."

"Rassled him," said Buchanan. "Little girls shoulda been in bed when that took place."

"Jack and me, we sneaked over and looked under the doors."

"Jack." Buchanan nodded. "His leg ever get fixed? I mind his pa sent him back east to the doctors."

"It never did," she said. Her voice again became harsh. "His pa sent him to get well and then died. She sent

him to boardin' schools and all. She didn't want him around."

"But he's back?"

"He's back. You can have ham and bacon and fried potatoes with your eggs. I've got biscuits in the oven," she said briskly, "and I mean *real* biscuits. Not your sourdoughs."

He followed her into the kitchen. It was hot, but the good odors made it pleasant. He watched her move at her tasks. She was extraordinarily graceful, a long-legged girl with a fine freedom of action. She would be strong, he thought, and useful.

"What about Jack these days?" he asked. If the boy had a bad leg, then he limped. . . .

She cracked a fifth and sixth egg rather too viciously. "Young Jack lives his own life."

"Does he limp on that bum leg?"

"He limps. It don't slow him down much. But he limps when he ain't ridin' wild."

"A bad boy, is he?"

She put thin strips of bacon in another pan. She did not look at Buchanan. "No. Jack's a damn fine boy. It's his stinkin' mother that's bad."

"That little lady? John's widow?" He was fishing for information. He was interested now, in the swift-moving boy with the lame leg and this supple girl with the red hair. He had witnessed the holdup, and he did have a sense of responsibility that too often led him into trouble.

"That little Black Widow . . . the spider. You better stay away from her, Tom Buchanan. She gets 'em all."

"She does, now? Why, I mind her as a plain little lady with nothin' much to say for herself. John, he was the goer and doer and drinker and hooter."

"John wasn't a bad man. She's a witch." She turned the sizzling bacon, moved the eggs to a cooler place on the stove, opened the oven with the apron wrapped around her right hand, turned, took down a huge platter. "I know I shouldn't talk like this. But you knew us all when—when things were might different around here. And . . . well, Pa is deep into the bottle and refusin' to

hear a word against her. She's got somethin'. I don't know what. Like some kinda spell the Indians talk about. I ain't scared of her. On the other hand, I don't seek out her company."

She put eggs and bacon together, added biscuits upon another plate, produced butter and coffee. He noted again that she moved with the smooth speed of a lightweight boxer. He thought of Coco Bean and wished he were here to comment. The black prizefighter was a master of clean, quick moves.

He said, however, "You sure this is the same lady who was married to John Wagoner?"

"It sure is." She put the food on a small worktable and sat opposite him on a backless stool, her blue eyes pleased as he began to eat as only a hungry big man can. "I remember you. John Wagoner hated to have you leave."

"We got along." Buchanan did not pause in putting away the fine grub.

"Funny about her. She changed overnight. When Jack came home she went at him like a tough foreman. He saw how she was underpayin' everybody, using cheaters as dealers in the saloon, grabbin' everything. He hated it."

"John bought the saloon?"

"She bought the saloon after John died. Foreclosed the mortgage on Joe Willow. Joe died and his son Harold, they call him 'Fats,' he went with Jack."

"And they took to the hills."

She swung away, then off the stool and back busying herself about the big kitchen. "Nobody knows. The Widow's got plenty people tryin' to find 'em."

"What good would it do her to find Jack now?"

"I don't know, confessed the girl. "He hates her—what she's done—the men she's got around her. He wouldn't fall in with her notions. I just don't know."

She knew more than she would tell, Buchanan thought. It was Jack Wagoner who had gone east to college, but this girl had brains enough and maybe a few more. She

spoke the frontier lingo, but the mind was working all the time.

"You make out here all right?" Buchanan asked.

"Just as long as Pa's the marshal, the Black Widow's marshal, that is."

"You mean she'd run you out if anything went wrong," he said. "This widow I've got to see. This is somethin' entirely new to my experience."

"Oh, you'll see her. You can't be overnight in Wagoner without seein' her."

"She stays in town a lot?"

"About half of the time. Her office is over the saloon. Then there's the promenade."

"The what?"

"When the sun is goin' down and the heat dies down and the lights are clinkin' back off the eastern hills, you know, the early evenin' light?"

"Pink-like and real pretty," he nodded. "I remember."

"Makes a female look younger and prettier. Well, it's then she promenades. Down Main Street. With Monte Bellario, the man who runs the bar, and Sig Miller, the gunman who works there. And if Pat Prince or Dud Davis is in town they walk too. One end of the street to the other. Like a parade. Pa's always in it, too. Promenade, he says."

"Uh-huh. 'A walk in a public place,' it says in the dictionary. Frenchy kinda word, ain't it?"

"Like a queen lookin' over her kingdom." There was a hint of envy in the young voice. She wore a long gingham dress beneath her soiled apron, sensible shoes, thickly half-soled, her hair caught back in a bun. Her hands were red with with the work of the kitchen. Freckles shone across the perfection of her nose. Her lips were red but turned slightly down at the corners.

"She's old enough to be your ma, and she never saw the day she could hold a candle to you," Buchanan told her. He mopped up the last of egg yolk with the last biscuit. He put a dollar on the table. "Further and more you can cook as fine as any woman I ever met up with."

She touched the money, then picked it up, and put it

in a pocket of the apron. She neither flinched nor flushed. She asked quietly, "Yeah, but what has she got that I haven't got?"

"I dunno," said Buchanan. "Maybe I can find out."

He went back into the restaurant proper with Polly a step behind him. The door to the street banged wide open. Three men crowded in as Buchanan stopped in his tracks. Polly came and stood beside him.

The first man was short and wide and pallid, an indoor person with snake eyes and long arms and white, delicate hands. He wore one gun on his hip and another beneath his left arm. He exuded an aura of danger.

The second man was Pat Prince.

The third wore a grizzled mustache and scraggly beard. His nose was red and heavily veined. His eyes were pale, slightly bleary. On his buckskin vest there was a highly polished star. It was with some difficulty that Buchanan recognized Simon Pease. The man was no more than forty years of age. He looked sixty.

"That's him," said the marshal, pointing at Buchanan. "That's Tom Buchanan. Know him anywhere."

The squat man drew his shoulder gun with the speed of a butterfly's wing. Pat Prince came forward and added his touch.

"He's the one seen it. Said he was atop Mount Aware. That's what he said."

Simon Pease spoke to Buchanan. "You got to go with us. Right now."

Buchanan said, "Uh-huh. Looks that way, don't it?"

Polly took a step forward. "Sig Miller." She spoke for Buchanan's benefit, with emphasis on the name of the gunman she had earlier identified. "You dirty little gunslinger! You know you're barred from this place. Get out!"

The serpent eyes flickered toward Polly. Buchanan jumped, four times as quick as might be expected of one his size. His left hand clamped on the wrist of the hand holding the revolver. His right hand swung, palm open, against the cheek of Sig Miller.

He came around, Miller's weapon in his fist. He did

not even look at the gunslinger as he went around like a carousel and slammed against the wall. "I don't rightly cotton to bein' shanghaied on dry land," he said. "If a lady wants to see me she need only send an invitation."

Miller was reaching for his second six-shooter, not so swift now, dogged, one side of his face scarlet, the other livid. Buchanan fired.

The Colt scattered out of Miller's grasp. Now he swore in pain as he grabbed his wrist with his other hand.

"Well, now" Buchanan told him, "no wonder the lady don't want you in her place. Get up."

Miller struggled to his feet. He wore gambler's black, which was now rumpled and a bit dusty. The eyes were slits, a strong light shone from them. While he lived, Buchanan knew, another day would never be safe from his vengeance.

"Let's all go see the Widow," Buchanan went on. "Maybe we can all join the promenade later on." He bowed to Polly. "I'd be proud to have you parade with me."

She suppressed a grin. She curtsied with that consummate grace that was hers. "Thank you, sir. I shall wear my best."

Buchanan turned to the others and waved Miller's revolver. "After you, gentlemen."

Neither Pease nor Prince spoke. Miller held himself together by main strength and the pride of a born killer. They walked ahead of Buchanan across the dusty street to a flight of stairs leading up above the saloon.

Polly Pease watched them go. Her eyes sparkled, her cheeks were pink with excitement. She wheeled when they were out of view and danced into the kitchen. There she stopped, transfixed, the color leaving her face.

Seated in the chair Buchanan had occupied was a strikingly handsome young man. He had long hair and sideburns but was clean shaven. He was blond, green-eyed, altogether a beautifully put-together youth. He wore Levi's and soft rider's boots and a dark shirt and vest and a neckerchief of red and blue.

"You're happy for once," he remarked. His voice was soft, his intonation not of the western country.

She recovered her poise on the instant. In a hard voice she said, "I just saw a man."

"Buchanan." It was not a question.

"Yes. Once a friend. Now, again, a friend of mine."

He indicated the platter. "Have you no food for a lifelong friend?"

"You stole the payroll again." Her eyes darkened. It's a damn poor, stupid way to act."

"The money will be put to good use."

"You fool, you dumb fool. You think you can buy happiness for these people around here? A few meals. A trip to Tucson or Deming or even El Paso to a doctor. You think that brings down the Black Widow?"

He sighed, looking at her. He could stand against many things, but not her scorn. "I do what I can. The boys—they're all for bringing in guns, starting a war. I can prevent that. But . . . we all do what we can."

"You've got enough loot to get out," she told him. "You could all go away and start over and try to be somebody. You can't win sulkin' in the mountains. You'll get yourselves killed sooner or later, and what's more—you know it. Maybe the others don't know it. But you do!"

"Perhaps." He did not seem perturbed.

"Or you could fight it out in the open. Buchanan just slapped Sig Miller until he spun like a kid's top. Right now he's over there with them—but he's holdin' the gun, Sig's gun. Buchanan's a man."

"Your definition." He arose. He was tall and slim, and any girl would look at him, twice, three times, a hundred times. "In such a fight your father might well be the first to die."

"My pa chose his way. It ain't mine." She inhaled, her full chest rose high. "I know everything you do. I know what she does. I know why she does it, leastways I can guess, like you can guess. But I won't knuckle under to her and I won't try to rob her blind."

"You've mentioned that before," he said with gentle

...ry. He took a step and suddenly was three inches shorter, as his left foot touched the floor. He limped to the door, turned to look at her again. "We can't ever agree, Polly. I'm sorry. It breaks my heart."

"If Buchanan goes after you, what will you do?"

"Capture him and talk to him. He's a man known for being fair."

"You'll capture Buchanan? You and your crowd of kids!" She did not laugh. She only shook her head. "Best you don't try, Jack. Best you leave the country before you try."

He smiled. "You really did take to him. Maybe an older man could handle you, eh?"

She said, "Damn your soul, Jack Wagoner."

But he had gone out the door, laughing gently in a way she knew, without malice. He was mounting easily on the strong grulla that knew all the mountain roads. There was nothing lame when he was in the saddle and she knew that's where he lived as much as possible. He was a horseman, that was his equalizer, that made up to him for the accident to his leg.

She watched him ride out the back way, past the shacks where the people loved him for his gifts, for his untold talk of the future, for his promises. And for the advice he had learned at the medical school he never finished. She would deny a sudden fear that she would never in the world have let him see her afraid.

He had come to town in order to spread much of the stolen payroll among the people, she knew. His life was in danger every moment, but he would not allow any of the others do it. Always claiming that his mother, the Widow, would not have him killed. Polly knew better, she believed.

She was not certain. But she believed the Widow would eliminate anyone who stood in her way. The Widow owned all she surveyed and would never give up a tiny piece of it, not to anyone—least of all her only son....

CHAPTER TWO

BUCHANAN held the whiskey glass in his fist and tried not to stare. In the first place the office over the saloon was like no other he had seen in the West. There were dimity curtains at the window, there was wallpaper of huge pink roses, there was a painting of the mountains done in oils, there was a spinet piano in a corner. There was carpet on the floor. The desk was more like a lady's escritoire, white quill pens fanned out of a tiny silver humidor filled with birdshot.

There were chairs, all spindly excepting the one in which Buchanan was ensconced, all with cane bottoms. Upon them perched—in huge discomfort—Pat Prince, Happy Halow, Simon Pease, and, in the far corner, hunched forward, unforgiving hard eyes always upon Buchanan, Sig Miller.

The Widow Wagoner sat behind the desk, her back to the wall. She was small, dark as Buchanan had remembered. But beyond, she was another person. Her eyes glowed with a light he had never seen. Her cheeks had filled out but not too much, her lips were tinted, delicately,

so that they curved. In their curve lay the hint of the Widow's mood. If she was pleased, they turned up, not quite in a full smile. If she was unhappy, they turned down in a definite sulk.

The Widow wore black. In her hair was a black fan comb glittering with diamonds. Her throat was bare and unlined, and a necklace of ebony Apache tears gleamed against the white skin. The dress was of some fine material that clung to her slim hips but swirled full so that when she moved the fine ankles were boldly on display.

At this moment she was somewhat pleased, somewhat angry. The line of her mouth altered with the passing moments. She had poured wine for herself, the best whiskey for Buchanan, nothing for the others. Her attitude toward the local quartet was of contemptuous indifference. With Buchanan it was another matter altogether.

"You're sure he limped, Tom?" Her voice was low pitched and pleasant.

"I had him in the field glasses. They moved real quick, but I saw that much."

Pat Prince growled, "It was him and them others. There ain't no doubt about it."

Happy Halow put his hands together as the Widow arched an eyebrow in his direction. "Seems like it has to be. The way they knew where to move in and all."

"Jack," Buchanan said "Just a tyke when he got hurt, I remember."

"Ten," she said. "John put him on that bronch when he was ten."

"Well, he'd been ridin' since he was a toddler," Buchanan said.

"It was a rank mustang and you know it," she said, her mouth straight and grim now. "You damn men always stick together. You know John shouldn't have done it."

Buchanan shrugged. "Horse people. My dad was the same. I was throwed every day of my life 'till I learned."

Happy Halow said, "Amen."

The Widow turned and surveyed the two who had been robbed. "Four boys. You were prepared. It had happened before. You let four boys fool you. Or did you?"

"Hey! What the—what do you mean by that?" demanded Pat Prince, coming to his feet.

She stared him down. "You know damn well what I mean. You two know he's my son. You're scared to hurt him. I told you to bring him in, didn't I?"

"We didn't have no chance to hurt him," said Prince. "We never seen him. Buchanan told you that."

"Any of them," she insisted harshly. "Doug . . . Fats . . . Jack. Any of them. Bring them in. I'll take care of them after you bring them in."

"We been out after 'em. We scoured them mountains," Pat Prince said. "They're like mountain goats, them damn kids. Let anybody try to find 'em."

Sig Miller said from his corner, in a voice that scratched like chalk on a blackboard, "Yeah. This here jasper. He knows it all. He's the tough hombre."

"Buchanan?" The Widow was suddenly thoughtful.

Simon Pease's voice had been long broken by the booze. "Hey, that might be an idea. Jack knows Tom Buchanan. Might be."

"Uh-huh," said Happy Halow. "Makes sense."

"Did you have some plans, Tom?" She was smiling. "I mean, right now?"

Buchanan said, "Uh-huh."

"Important?"

"Uh-huh," said Buchanan.

The corners of her mouth began to droop. Sig Miller held onto his aching wrist and sneered. "Reckon he don't hanker for the mountain trails. Not with four guns pointin' down his throat."

Simon Pease said bravely, "I could arrest him. Keep him in the hoosegow 'til he agreed."

Pat Prince and Happy Halow said nothing. They were not in good standing, and they knew enough to remain in the background. The Widow arose and took a few steps, turning so that her wide skirt twirled. She was wearing

silk stockings. The eyes of Pease and Pat Prince bugged out. Buchanan watched the men, ignoring the woman.

She said, "You could do us a big favor, Tom. Talk to Jack. He's the leader. The other boys—they're just orphans and drifters. We think we know who they are, each of them. They are boys that can't fit in. Can't hold a job. You might could make some sense."

"What makes you think so?" asked Buchanan. He still watched Miller and Pease and their gun hands. Simon had been good once, and Miller was longing for revenge.

The Widow said, "You always did talk sense. John knew it. I knew it."

"Seems like we didn't have much doin's back then," Buchanan said to her. "You were keepin' a mighty fine house, takin' care of the kid."

She flushed, which patently amazed the other men. Her voice went up to a higher pitch. "I was John Wagoner's wife. That doesn't mean I was deaf, dumb, and blind."

"Well, okay," said Buchanan. "Ten years, that's a heap of time. We're all different than we were ten years ago. And if Miller or Pease, either one, makes a move for their guns, I'll have to kick them around again."

She said, "You two. Get out."

"Aw, now, we could take him," whined Pease. "Me and Sig."

"Don't try it." She went back behind the desk and opened a drawer. She took out an ivory-handled, nickel-plated .44 and tossed it across the room. "It's loaded, Tom. If you want to shoot 'em, go right ahead. Hate to make a mess, but Simon and Sig think they're cute with guns."

Buchanan caught the weapon and deftly spun it on a finger. "They don't want to hurt anybody. They're just tryin' to help you out. Maybe just the two of us should talk, huh?"

She said, "I was just about to suggest it. Pat, Happy, all four of you—go downstairs. Stay in the bar until you hear from me. Don't get drunk." Her voice snapped.

Buchanan had once heard a drill sergeant at an army post speak like that. He hadn't liked it then, either.

He didn't like the way these men slunk out of the office and clattered down the stairs, which ran up the side of the building that contained the saloon on the ground floor. Even Miller, a hard case who didn't eye the Widow with the wishful lust of Pease and Prince, went without another glance at Buchanan. Happy Halow paused, winked, rolled his eyes at the woman, and went bowlegged behind the others. His humor was a contrast to the cringing of the others as the Widow applied the lash.

She brought a whiskey bottle to where Buchanan sat and poured into a four-ounce shot glass. She filled a goblet with wine from another bottle. She stood smiling, looking down at the big man in the one comfortable chair.

He shook his head. "I just don't feel like mindin' my manners and standin' up and all. Why don't you go back and settle behind that foofaraw desk of yours?"

For an instant she clouded over, mouth turned down. Then she showed white, even teeth. "Tom Buchanan, you always were a case."

"Not nearly like you seem to be right this minute."

She drank deeply of the red wine. "Yes. I'm a case. John dead. Jack in the hills."

"And you ownin' everything in sight. And wantin' more."

She lifted one shapely shoulder. "I'm damn near forty, Tom. There isn't a man in this country I'd have. Sooo . . . I go after other things."

"And your son."

"I want him back!" she flashed.

"Uh-huh. On your terms."

"Why not?"

"Because he's a man. Twenty-one."

"You're hard these days, Tom. Unsympathetic."

"I purely don't like the setup, Rose."

"You haven't had time to learn the layout."

"Uh-huh. Let's see how it looks: You send the kid

away to be cured and educated. On his own. He don't like it for one reason or another. He comes home. He also don't like what he hears and sees. How come?"

She said, "He can't understand what it takes. How you have to hold on and be firm."

"And starve the help?"

"Starve them? No person, man, woman, nor child, ever went without a meal in Wagoner!" Her chin came out, the ends of the mouth curled upward, proud, pleased. "They need only go to Polly's. I pay. You hear me? It's a standing order."

"Uh-huh," said Buchanan. "Mighty nice of you."

"You can bet on it."

"Uh-huh," said Buchanan. "I see." There was no use pursuing the rest of his thoughts about individual rights and liberty and independence. The Widow would never understand. "And the jail's pretty full at that, I'd reckon."

"Ungrateful!" She drank some wine. Her cheeks were flushed. "You have to beat sense into their heads. It's the only way. Beat it into them!"

"And keep wages down so they don't spend too much on booze and gamblin'?"

"Nothing can stop them. I ought to know. I own the saloon! They'll waste every spare penny."

"Sure, they will. But they don't dare complain because you got the law, you got gunslingers like Sig Muller, you got toughs Like Pat Prince. And I bet you got riders on the ranch that can put up a fight any minute."

"You bet I have! And I've got a gambler running the saloon that can spot a cheat a mile away. You name it, Tom. I hire it."

"Pretty classy setup. One thing, though. You haven't got your son."

The mouth opened a bit, the chin sagged. The eyes went cloudy. Then it all firmed up again. The fire returned to her. "That'll be your job."

"Don't bet on it."

"You'll do it," she said confidently. You're the kind of man who does what's right. This is the right thing to do."

"Is it?" She had force, and she was as changeable as a chameleon. Now she was turning on the charm, showing her ankle, the only silk-clad ankle in the Territory, possibly, outside the fanciest whorehouses. "Reckon I can't agree to that right off."

"You know the mountains," she said. "You rode them when you worked for us."

"For John Wagoner," he corrected her. "Not 'us.' You and me, we scarcely said hello."

"It was a different time." She lowered her eyes. She folded her hands, the jewels flicking off shards of light. "Of course Polly Pease talked. Dear Polly."

Buchanan lifted one big shoulder. He was weary of her prodding, her shifting moods. He sensed the danger in her, recognizing tensions behind her Cheshire Cat, slippery smile.

She said, "I've had to put Polly in her place. Cook and waitress, that's where she belongs."

"Uh-huh. Make a fine wife for some man," Buchanan said blandly. "Well, I'll be goin' now."

"Not without having a drink with the boys? At the bar? Come, I'll buy for the house. But it's a special occasion now, isn't it?"

"Uh-huh. It's the day I don't go huntin' for your son and his friends, or whoever is up there in the mountains with your latest payroll for the mines," Buchanan said.

He followed her down the outdoors stairway. She lifted her skirt to clear the risers, and down below a rider slowed his horse to stare, and a driver gaped from the seat of a wagon. Her chin tilted but with pride rather than resentment, Buchanan knew. It must have cost her a heap to buy those silk stockings.

They went into the saloon. Buchanan's eyes grew round. "This can't be the joint John Wagoner and me took apart."

"I aim to make everything I own as pretty as possible," she said. "We had to send to San Francisco for most of the furnishings."

"Uh-huh. I saw some like it up there," Buchanan said.

The bar was mahogany and shone like the mirror

that stretched behind it. There were stacked clean glasses. There was a brass rail and occasional spittoons shining bright in the clean sawdust. A furtive, woebegone swamper in the rear of the long room swished a mop around in small circles before a door marked OFFICE KEEP OUT.

That was not Mrs. Wagoner's office, therefore it had to be occupied by the man who stood alone at the end of the bar. He was large and slick and trim and he wore a black handlebar mustache and a goatee. His hair rippled to his shoulders. He wore gray rather than the gambler's black, but the diamond on his pinky and the checkered vest identified him to Buchanan. He had all the oily earmarks, and he had a cold and calculating eye. There was no discernible weapon on him, but the sleeves of his long coat were belled to disguise holdout guns.

"Mr. Bellario," the Widow said, indicating this personage. "Runs the place for me. Deals, too. Monte Bellario."

Buchanan said, "I see him there."

Bellario stared. He had narrow-spaced eyes, menacing when slitted, cherublike when rounded wide. They were dark eyes, and what Buchanan saw in them he did not like.

The bartender was also tall and formidable, another Latin, but not a Mexican. He had a wide face that showed no emotion. He was clean-shaven, and Buchanan could see the sawed-off shotgun on hooks, very convenient.

The Widow said, "Drinks for the house, Litteri."

There were three miners and a couple of cowboys down near the door. The men from upstairs whom Buchanan had met were in a tight group at the center of the bar. It was quiet in Wagoner's Saloon.

There were two poker tables, Buchanan saw, looking around, a roulette wheel, and a faro layout. The Widow wasn't missing a chance to get back the wages she paid to practically everyone in the district. Turning, he saw himself reflected in the mirror, the Widow beside him. Then he saw the obligatory painting, a must in every fancy saloon west of New York.

Litteri put the whiskey bottle before him. Buchanan reached for it, then froze, staring.

The painting was extraordinarily well-done. The lady stretched on a couch, covered only with a diaphanous piece of material like mosquito netting—only black, dead black. Unlike every other such lady he had seen she was not buxom. She was on the small side. She lifted a fan in her right hand, covering her features. Silk stocking adorned her pretty legs. They were secured in place by scarlet garters.

There now was not the slightest sound in the bar. The swamper leaned on the mop, bleary-eyed. Every eye was upon Buchanan.

He shifted his gaze from the painting to the reflection of the Widow on the mirror. She met the stare. One eyebrow lifted; her mouth turned up. It was full acknowledgment that the painting was of her; it was a challenge as she held his eyes.

Buchanan poured himself four ounces of whiskey. "Nice picture," he said. "Better'n most in Frisco."

"You like it?"

"I admire it," said Buchanan. He tossed off half his drink. He was not wearing a weapon of any sort, as was his custom in town. The stares of the men were stabbing at him, another challenge, daring him to say a disparaging word about their boss and mistress.

He was suddenly weary of it, of their kowtowing to her, of her digging at him. He went on, "There's a difference, y' know. Likin' is one thing. Admirin' is another."

The betraying corners of her mouth turned down. She drank from the glass of red wine Litteri had put before her. She wheeled and looked at the others.

She said, "What's the matter, no games? No dealers? No players?"

Simon Pease said in his unctuous, placating manner, "We was waitin' for you, till you told us how it—uh—how it is."

She said, "Business is sure lousy. Buchanan, you used to play poker. You game?"

"Not necessarily." He finished his drink. They had

not risen to his response, but the Widow was unhappy, trying to get him into a game. Bellario would take care of him in a card game, all right. Not that Buchanan wouldn't know when the moves were made, but there were too many guns against him if he should mention that he was being cheated. It was a very bad spot, and he resented it.

The Widow said, "You were always ready when John was alive. He was a sucker for you in a poker game."

"You do remember just every little thing, don't you?" He regarded her with a frown. "Funny, you were never around here. You were always out at the ranch. Takin' care of Jack, weren't you? Bossin' Dud Davishe still out at the place?"

"He runs it now," she said. "With a little help, maybe. From me."

"Uh-huh," said Buchanan. "Well, Dud always was a ladies man. Big old boy, good at cattle, bad with gals. That right?"

She said tightly, "That's something I wouldn't know."

"Uh huh," Buchanan said. "Well, maybe later we'll have a game. Feel like nappin' a bit, now." '

"I see." The Widow finished her wine. "Boys, let's us have a little game. Do you good to play with the Widow so soon after pay day."

They moved to the table, all her sycophants. There was no joy among them, but they went like lambs to the slaughter. Bellario was already breaking out decks and chips when Buchanan went through the front door. The Widow never gave him another glance—nor did any of the men who worked for her. A decision had been made, and Buchanan had not met the test and would be dealt with one way or another. Maybe they would let him leave town without harm if he moved fast enough, he thought.

He was not in the mood to move that fast. He was thoroughly annoyed. He was not yet angry, but he did not like the Widow, and his contempt for the men around her was complete. He stalked down Main Street toward the hotel.

The hostler had brought in his saddlebags and his rifle. The clerk was a mousy little man named Kantor. Buchanan took his gear to a room at the rear of the rambling little establishment.

It was clean enough, a typical small-town hotel room with washstand. He stripped and took a washcloth bath. He dried his huge body, shaking his head at the scars of previous battle. This town wasn't friendly, he had better get on his way, he thought, before dire events conspired to get him into trouble he did not seek.

He lay down on the bed. The door was locked, the windows—one on the back, one on the side of the building—were opened a crack for air on the warm, late afternoon. He plucked his six-gun from the saddlebag, cleaned it, lying on his back, and tucked it beneath his pillow. From long practice he would awaken at the slightest unseemly sound. He did not believe anyone would shoot him in cold blood. It could happen, but right now he did not believe it.

He yawned, closed his eyes, and thought about the Widow and her son and the people around the Widow and the audacious painting over the bar of the saloon. And then he thought of Polly Pease. The girl had plenty of spunk to speak out against the Widow in this burg, all right. Her own father was one of the crowd around the silk ankles.

There was a gentle tap upon his door. He came off the bed with the Colt in his hand, realized he was naked, and fumbled for the blanket. He wrapped it about him and went across the room and whispered, "Who is it?"

From outside, another whisper said, "Me. Let me in. It's important."

He unlocked the door. Polly Pease came into the room with that catlike grace he had noted. She bent to peer beneath the shades of both windows. Buchanan closed the door and watched her. She wheeled around, nodded, sat on the edge of the bed.

"I reckon nobody followed me. They're turnin' back their wages to her. In a game."

"Uh-huh," said Buchanan. He felt foolish with the

gun in his hand. He put it on the washstand and perched on the only chair in the room. Polly wasn't a pretty girl, but there was a lot about her that was nice. He had liked her on sight. "You got trouble?"

"Depends. What did the Black Widow want?"

"Wanted me to go after her son. She wants him back.'"

"Yeah. That's what she wants.'" The girl sighed. "You goin' after him?"

"Nope."

She brightened. "She didn't convince you? I knew she couldn't. I told him."

"Told who? Jack?"

"How did you know?" She stared at him. "Did they know he was in town? No, they couldn't of. They'd of been shootin' at him."

"Just *at* him, though," said Buchanan. "Just enough to make him think they're tryin' to kill him. Right?"

"Yes," she said. "That's what Pa says. But they'll make a mistake some day. Or get tired of playing her game. They'd kill the others without thinkin'. They're only kids, you know."

"All I know is what you and the Widow tell me," said Buchanan. "And I know I don't like her friends."

"Slaves," she corrected him.

"Whatever. Even your pa has changed."

"He let her cheat him. He's mad about her. You saw the painting?"

"Uh-huh."

"Like a female spider in her web. A young man with lung trouble painted it, they say. Out at the ranch. Then he disappeared. Some think Dud Davis handled that for her, so he could never say for sure she posed."

"But she wants people to know."

"Yeah. Without proof," said Polly. "That's the way she is."

"I understand." He did, too. He remembered the look she had given him in the mirror. This ranch wife, this woman he had scarcely noted a decade ago, had become a tyrannical ruler of a county. It seemed impossible.

"She walks on the people. She gets the husbands

drunk, and Bellario trims them in the saloon. The kids go hungry because she can cut off credit when she wants. And she knows Jack brings the money in to those who need it. Her money from the payrolls and from the cattle they steal."

"You mean those kids run cattle, too?"

"There's a way out of the mountains. . . ." She broke off. "I can't talk about it. They're going to get killed. I know it. I've begged Jack. Just this afternoon, I told him."

"So you want me to talk to them?"

"I do . . . and I don't. If you go up there, they might shoot you. They wouldn't want to, but they might feel they have to. That's how they feel about the Widow and anybody who might be connected with her."

"So?"

"I could take you there."

"Uh-huh. What about your eatery there?"

"If I took you there, I'd give it up. I mean, the town and all. I'd never come back."

"It means that much to you?"

"To get away from here, clean away . . . If I could get Jack to see it's no good."

Buchanan thought for a moment. Then he said, "Polly, think it over. I'll take a nap, then I'll be over to the place for a meal. Think it all out."

"You'll do it?"

"If I do . . . it better be quick," he told her. "The Widow's thinkin' things over herself right now, you can bet on that. She wants me to go up there real bad. Seems her bunch can't make it without killin' her son. And she wants him back to kneel along with the rest, the way it looks to me."

"You're right."

"I could tell her I'm goin' to bring him back. But it would be a lie. I ain't much on lyin'. If we could get out after dark, one way or another. . . .Well, it may be."

"You'll do it." Her eyes crinkled, the wide mouth smiled. "Mr. Buchanan?"

"Uh-huh?"

"Your blanket's slippin'." She laughed for the first

time, and it was like a bell tinkling and she ran out of the room on her long legs as he clutched the blanket about his middle.

"Yeah," he muttered to himself. "And you're some kind of liar your own self. But I like it."

He could not close the windows against the heat. His mind was too busy too allow for the nap he desired. He began putting on clothing and packing the saddlebags. He sighed and attached the gunbelt with the shiny old holster and the easy-action .45 Colt with five of its six cylinders showing the brass points of bullets. He hated wearing the gun, but he knew better than to walk in the town of Wagoner without it. He had sampled Wagoner and found it wanting. The Black Widow controlled the center of the web.

If they were not spying on him through the windows, they would easily pick him up anywhere in the dinky town. He was too big to hide. It was all right for Polly Pease to slicker her slim, swift form around back ways she would recognize in the dark. Buchanan's best way was to go forward, as in a cavalry charge.

He carried his gear to the lobby and laid a dollar bill on the desk. The clerk shivered and did not touch it, as though it was bad luck. Maybe they had detected the girl at that, Buchanan thought. Maybe it would be a war from the moment he stepped outdoors.

He shouldered the saddlebags, carrying the rifle in his left hand, leaving his right hand free. He walked with measured tread to the stable. He saddled Nightshade, responding to the whinny of affection from the big black. He shoved the rifle into the scabbard but did not cover it. He walked into the stable yard, Nightshade following.

They were all around the stable. The little clerk from the hotel was there, sniveling and talking to Widow Wagoner. The others all held guns or were ready to draw guns, each according to his temperament. Buchanan stopped. Nightshade rolled his eyes, knowing guns, knowing danger.

"Steady, boy," Buchanan said to the horse. "It's the strange people. Steady."

The Widow appeared from behind Bellario and Prince. She held Polly by an arm. She was thrusting a pearl-handled .32 S & W into Polly's ear. The Widow's face was flushed, her eyes dangerous, the corners of her mouth a straight, thin line. She wore red slippers in the dust—to match the red garters on the black silk stockings, Buchanan thought.

"Buchanan!" Her voice was whiplike.

"I hear you." He had his finger on the trigger of the rifle. His right hand hovered over the butt of the Colt. "You might remember somethin', ma'am. I'm damn quick."

"You're also peaceable," she reminded him. "You don't want the girl killed. You don't want to kill me, or my friends, even."

"True," he said. "You know that."

"There will be no killing," she said. "We will keep the girl. Her own father will keep her in the jail. Right, Simon?"

"It's fer her own good," declared the marshal.

"Right," said the Widow. "You just ride out there and bring back my boy, Buchanan."

"Uh-huh. Funny you didn't think of this before," said Buchanan. "T'would've been just as easy."

"Oh, I thought of it," said the Widow. "But I didn't have a man persuasive enough. Or one to get close enough to them. You can do it. Jack knows you."

"But I don't know Jack," Buchanan objected. "I ain't altogether sure he won't shoot me on sight. Then what?"

"Then Polly will remain in the hoosegow," said the Widow. "I'm quite fond of the notion of keeping her there. All kinds of nice crawly things in the jail. It'll do her good, the nasty little brat."

She shoved the muzzle of the gun so that it hurt Polly's ear. The girl ducked away. Bellario seized her by the elbow and swung her around.

Buchanan fired the rifle from the hip. Bellario screamed, clapped a hand to his ear. Buchanan fired again. A red heel flew off the slipper of the Widow, and she added her cries of shock to the air of the late afternoon.

Buchanan was drawing and shooting the Colt. Men broke and ran for cover. Simon Pease was rushing to the aid of the floundering Widow, who believed she had lost one of her precious silken ankles. Bellario's ear was bleeding down the sleeve of the gray jacket, as he hopped and howled, clinging to what was left of it.

Sig Miller stood with hands half-upraised, his eyes never leaving Buchanan, knowing he was watched more closely than the others. Now Polly broke in her long, coltish stride, making for Buchanan and the horse. Nightshade stood, ears perked but staunch.

Buchanan called, still with one eye on Miller. "All right, now I'll start shootin' for real in a minute."

They all seemed to realize that he meant it. Only the Widow, minus a heel from her red slipper, swinging around with the gun, was not cautious nor afraid.

She screamed, "Get her! Get him!"

She lifted the gleaming, dangerous .32. Buchanan fired offhand, and for the second time that day he knocked a weapon from the grasp of its owner. The Widow keened as had Miller, the sting and shock unbearable. She hopped on one leg, circling, howling.

"Kill him! Kill her! They've crippled me for life! Kill them!"

Sig Miller lifted a lip. The Widow might continue to rule, Buchanan thought, but she had lost the respect of the man who had likewise suffered humiliation, likewise cried out but had then held his peace, bided his time. He was a man to be reckoned with, Buchanan thought. Sig Miller, silent gunthrower. . . .

Polly had reached man and horse. Buchanan swung up into the saddle and leaned down to help her mount. He still held rifle and revolver. She grasped his wrist and flung herself behind him, skirts flying, regardless of the flashing display of long, shapely limb.

Simon Pease drew his revolver. He aimed and fired. Buchanan let loose with the rifle, offhand, at the same moment. He heard the girl cry out, "Pa! You shot me, Pa!"

Then Nightshade was taking off, running straight at

those who barred the gate to the stable yard. Buchanan thrust the rifle into the scabbard, the revolver into its holster. He held the rein in his teeth as he reached around.

The girl was swaying, her eyes closed, blood running down her cheek. He twisted her from her seat athwart the saddlebags. Using all his enormous strength, he brought her around so that he held her in one arm. He settled her as close and comfortable as possible. He turned Nightshade loose along the road to the mountains.

They were all shooting now, panicked, headless, mindless, frustrated, firing their guns at a horse, a man, and a girl who fled in gathering twilight. It was not the guns Buchanan feared. It was the head wound suffered by the girl. He had to put distance between them and town, he had to find a retreat from which he could fight if necessary, he had to find clean running water, and he had to use all his crude but complete frontier medical knowledge to work on her.

And then he had to find young Jack Wagoner and his fast-moving friends. They would be shooting at him for one reason or another, he supposed. They would suspect him of one of any number of crimes—including the wounding and abducting of Polly Pease.

It was not a really fine time in Buchanan's life.

CHAPTER THREE

NIGHTSHADE climbed the hills bearing double, uncomplaining. However, even the big black might harm himself in the night, and Buchanan stopped him and slid down, holding the girl, smelling the odor of dried blood greasy from her head and hair. Nightshade blew uneasily, disliking the smell, but Buchanan quieted him with a word.

They were at a tiny stream that he knew. He knelt, attuning his ears. The girl's breathing was so labored that it worried him. He left her a moment and put ear to the earth to listen for vibrations. He climbed a high rock, of which there were thousands on the hillsides, and adjusted his being to the night sounds that he knew so well—the sounds of creatures and insects and owls and running water. He could not at this juncture detect pursuit.

He thought it might not be too far away. The Widow had prevented them from shooting to kill her son, but they had been flouted too often. In fact she had been defeated too often, he firmly believed. And knowing the

girl was wounded, knowing that Nightshade must carry two would tempt them to the chase. He would have to play it that way, in any case.

He went back to the girl. She muttered a few words he could not understand. A piece of moon showed itself in a cloudy sky. He went to his saddlebags and took out a tiny dark lantern and a well-corked container of coal oil. He dipped a white linen handkerchief in the stream, and, by the light of the lantern, he bathed the slice of wound along the skull of the girl. Her blood had coagulated efficiently, he saw. He was careful not to start the flow again, working delicately, his huge hands amazingly deft and gentle and skillful. She was young and healthy, and she showed all the signs of great strength

He knew about gunshot wounds. He had attended to them upon others and upon himself. He had watched surgeons perform so often that he felt he might himself manage a scalpel under great need. He would have stitched Polly's wound excepting that it was partly—and would probably be fully—covered by her long, red hair. He made a bandage of the wet kerchief. He found a bit of string in his conglomerate of gear and tied back her locks. He sat looking at her.

She should be conscious by now, they should be trying to move on. He did not like the uneven, heavy breathing. He put his hand on her forehead. She was burning with fever. He was instantly alarmed. He repacked his saddlebag. He picked up the girl and put her in the saddle. He said to Nightshade, "Horse, we got to climb some more. We never needed high gun more'n we do this time. You savvy? You carry her, I'll find the way."

He always believed Nightshade understood his tone of voice, if not the words. They set off for the top of the mountain, from whence he had first sighted the holdup by young Jack Wagoner and his partners. It was, he reasoned, another spot with water and also one with which he was familiar. From this vantage he might make a fight, might even draw from hiding the son of the Black Widow.

Otherwise, if the girl did not recover enough to tell him the way, he would have to go to Costello's Canyon

and search for himself. Her life might well depend upon it. He knew about fever and despised and hated a seizure. He got out his blankets against the chills that invariably followed and prepared to spend the night without sleep.

Jack Wagoner lounged in the depth of a cave so snug that no fire was needed even on a chilly mountain night. Outside in the corral the horses huddled together but would be none the worse since they were hill animals from birth. The other three youths sat nearer the entrance of the hole in the mountainside.

Fats Willow was closest to Jack in every way, a strong, big young fellow no longer deserving the nickname hung upon him when he was a toddler, wide and strong and heavyset. He had bright eyes and big hands that were usually busy braiding a halter or a reata, sewing a saddle flap, attending to all chores.

He said, "I remember Buchanan. A good man with cattle."

"You don't mind he was a poker-playin' fool and a shooter?" demanded Doug Douglas. He was straw-haired, his father had been a miner. Douglas Senior had died in a cave-in after warning the Widow that the shaft was in need of timbers. He had been trying to bring out one of his pals when he was trapped. The Widow never did anything about it, and few knew she had been put on warning by Douglas. But the son knew.

Arizona Jones was the oldest of the quartet. The Widow had caught him skinning a heifer for food and had charged him and caused him to be sent to Yuma Prison. He had been in the pen when Jack returned from the East and learned of what had happened in his absence —and had made the acquaintance of a mother he failed to recognize.

Very few people had escaped the jail at Yuma. Jack, Fats, and Doug had pulled their first payroll robbery, used part of the money to bribe a jailer, and then had rescued Arizona. It had seemed a plain piece of justice, but Arizona still was quiet, still bore the scars of beatings and leg irons.

He said, "Buchanan's been a lawman, too. They talk about him at Yuma. People talk about him a lot."

"I don't know which way he'll go," Jack admitted.

"We was smart, we'd bushwhack him before he gets to us."

Fats stared at Arizona. "We don't walk that trail, don't you know that yet?"

Jack said, "Buchanan was also a fast gun. And good with horses. He was kind to me."

"Fast gun?" Arizona laughed. "Forget that. I wouldn't ever back down from no Buchanan."

Doug spoke up for the first time. "He's right. Arizona don't need to take any guff from oldtimers."

"I'd like to know, what went on between him and your ma?"" Arizona demanded. "How do we know he ain't after us right now?"

"He does know these mountains," said Doug.

"We don't know," Jack agreed. He arose from the blankets. "I can find out, though."

"Polly?" asked Fats.

"Polly," said Jack.

"You ought to let us go in with you. They'll sure be onto you some night."

"They'd be onto four of us quicker," Jack said. He limped to the mouth of the cave, lifted a hand, smiled at them. "See you later."

He went outside and stood a moment, looking at the moon, which showed from behind the clouds. He heard Arizona's voice, high and whinning.

"We do the jobs, collect the loot, and Jack gives half of it away. We should grab what we can and shake this country and forget the Widow. She's too strong for us, too many people around her."

Fats Willow's bass came clear. "You talk against Jack, and you got me to think about. You understand that?"

"I ain't talkin' against him. I know what yawl did for me. But that Buchanan . . . and the Widow. . . ."

"Just shut up and wait," Fats told him. "Jack'll figure out something. He's got the brains. He's miles ahead of the rest of us."

Jack moved away. He had sensed the small trouble in the minds of Arizona and Douglas before now. They were loyal enough, but they were not as stout of heart as Fats. They did not deeply believe in the crusade to change conditions in the country by bringing his mother to realize what she was doing to people who could not fight back. . . . If it ever could be done, that is.

He thought back to their last encounter. It was clear in his mind: every harsh word, every bit of complete misunderstanding. It had made him wonder if she had hated his father, if she had always hated her only son, if there was no hope that she would ever see an inch beyond her own desires for property—and for submission, as though she were a queen.

When he had faced her that last time, telling her of the suffering of people—which she could easily allay—and of Fats Willow's father and Doug Douglas's father and the injustice of putting Arizona in jail for a minor offense, she had glared at him. It was months ago now, but it was all clear to him.

She had said with venom in every syllable, "Is that what you learned in that stinkin' eastern college? Is that what they're teachin' back there—anarchy? Oh, you don't think I know what anarchy means. But I do, I do. . . . Wobblies have tried it on the mine . . . I.W.W.; I Won't Work. We fixed 'em damn quick. Are you one of them?"

"Certainly not, Mother," he had told her. "It's merely a matter of doing the right thing. Keep the working people happy, and they'll make you better off. It's not socialism. It's enlightened capitalism."

She had put her hand over her ears. "That mealy-mouth talk! You drive me loco with it."

"I'm telling you the truth."

"Just like your father!" She hadn't listened to him. "I worked and slaved to get where I am. Your old man was a fool, a lucky fool, is all. I kept the ranch goin', me and Dud Davis. Your damn-fool father put you on that rank bronch, then when you got hurt he sent you away. So I wish you'd stayed away. I'd pay you to stay away, you and your hifalutin' notions."

He had caught his breath, tears smarting unshed, held back. "Mother, you really hate me, don't you?"

"I despise a weaklin'. You and your father. He was a gamblin' fiddle-foot, was what he was. If it wasn't for me he'd have lost the whole shebang before he got himself dead. And you—consortin' with greasers and stinkin' miners and even Injuns. And that homely-as-mud Polly Pease, that slut—"

Now he had grown very hard, angrier than he had thought he could be. He had stopped her. "That's enough of that kind of rotten talk!"

"Ha! Polly Pease and her drunken bum of an old man! I haven't even started on them—"

"You've finished!" he had said. "If you won't listen, and you haven't listened, I'll go my way. Maybe you'll learn. Maybe I will be able to teach you."

"You? You crippled young fool!" Her laugh had been a cackle. The wine had been strong in her that day. "Go away, go some place, and let me know where to send the money. It's all you'll ever be good for. Get out!"

He had limped out. It was the thing he had not conquered, this sensitivity about the limp. It diminished him in his own eyes. He left her yelling at him and thought that at least she was worse then he, that she had shown herself to be worse than he had believed.

He owned that in which he stood, then: his Stetson, his fine boots handmade in El Paso, and his specially fitted trousers. He owned a horse and saddle and an extra set of clothing, with shirts, underwear, socks. He could not wear ready-made clothing. It would be hard, but at that moment the plan had begun to take shape. When he was twenty-one he could go to law and seek his heritage. Until then he would take what he needed—and more.

Fats Willow had joined at once. Doug had been next, and then had come the adventure to set free Arizona, who was Doug's oldest and closet friend. Among them they had known enough dissident people to be aware of the herds of the Widow which roamed the countryside. They had then begun their depredations. . . .

Jack brought himself back to the present, beneath the moon, alongside the corral they had built in the fastness of their secret retreat in Costello's Canyon. The mustangs scented his presence and moved, milling a bit. There was a black horse named Bo, a wild one he had captured on the high plain above the canyon. He limped to the corral and called, "Hey, you Bo! Get yourself awake, there. Come here, you rascal."

Despite his accident or maybe because of it, he had a way with horseflesh. Even the wild bunch on the plain knew of it, felt it. Now the cavvy in the corral milled rebelliously but without ill temper. The black and white Bo tossed his head and made a complete circle of the premises to show his independence. Jack took a rope from the corral gate and tossed it. The reata around his neck, Bo stood and made small noises but did not attempt to run.

"You have good sense," Jack told him, grabbing his saddle from the top rail, standing on his good leg, slapping it into place. He put his short leg against Bo's middle and yanked the cinch tight. He slipped the bridle into place, reached for the reins. "Just take it nice and easy tonight. We may have a little trouble, so don't fuss, you hear me?"

He let down the bar, walked Bo through, closed the gate behind him. He mounted easily with a little flying leap. They wound their way through the intricacies of the secret entrance to the hideout and went down to the trail that led to town.

He made the trip quickly and came to the *cantina* of Romano. He stayed in the back, in the shadows of the edge of town, and tiptoed to the door. It was quiet in the little adobe building, but he was always extremely careful of traps. If they had learned about Romano and had captured him. . . . He held his six-gun ready as he tapped on the door, using a long prearranged signal.

After a moment the door opened. Romano was a tall, thin man, half Italian, half Mexican-Indian. His sister had been one of the first befriended by Jack when her

children had been hungry. He beckoned and Jack slipped into the rear room of the *cantina*.

Romano said, "Have you seen the big one?"

"Buchanan?"

"Buchanan."

"No. He talked to my mother, didn't he?"

"He did. They had long talk." Romano hesitated.

"Go on. I knew that."

"Okay. Buchanan goes to hotel to sleep. Something bad happens. I do not know all. I know only that there is shooting. The *señorita*—"

"Polly?"

"They say her own papa shoot her."

"Polly? Is she . . . is she dead?"

"Oh no. Buchanan . . . he took her. On the big hoss, Buchanan and the *señorita* ride for the mountains."

"Buchanan kidnapped her?"

"I don't know from 'kidnap.' He took her with him. After she was shot."

"Then no one was killed?"

"No. Your mama, she holler like someone is killed, all right. She lose heel, I think."

"Her heel? Off her slipper?"

"Off her red slipper. Shot off."

"Buchanan shot off her heel?"

"Yes. He shoots very good no?"

"He shoots very good indeed." Polly was alive, Buchanan had her in the hills. He had to digest this, think about it.

Romano was talking. "This Buchanan, he talk long, long time in office. Your mama wants something from him. Does she get it? Does she not get?"

"There is no way of learning, not until we find Buchanan. Or he finds us."

"So?" Romano was truly concerned.

"So I'll look around."

"The word will go out." Romano gestured. "Business is better, now. I think the poor people with pennies to spend do not go to the saloon of your mama."

"And your poker game is honest," Jack said. "Good luck, *amigo*."

"God go with you."

Jack went out to the black and white mustang The moon had fortunately retreated behind a thick bank of clouds. He wanted to know more and he could not trust anyone else in the town to inform him. His thoughts ran to Polly.

She and Fats were the only ones who fully understood him, his inner thoughts, his ambitions. He trusted her even though she disagreed with his methods. He had found her fully developed in all areas upon his return from the East, and they had grown to know each other.

If her pitiable father had shot her, wounded her, and Buchanan had taken her away, that was one thing. That was good.

If she had been wounded by accident and Buchanan had seized the opportunity to carry her off, that was another situation altogether. That was puzzling.

He mounted he always felt more at home in the saddle these days. He rode the dark back ways he knew into the neighborhood where the poor people huddled. The lights were dim here, homemade candles or oil lamps turned low. Jack and the horse were as ghosts padding the streets, the dirt streets littered with rubbish.

Even here, where he had distributed largess, he did not fully trust everyone Only Polly and Romano had proved steadfast. Through the restaurant Polly had garnered gossip that Romano could not know of—through the *cantina* had come information not privy to Polly and her clientele. Now the skein was cut.

He thought of his mother. The Black Widow, they called her. Was it possible that she could be as she seemed, the woman who had borne him? He knew it was true. He had faced her with the sins of commission and ommission often enough to learn the answer. Yet . . . she was his mother.

He rode around the saloon and came to the back of the building, still in the saddle. If he could have one more talk with her, now that she knew his strength, his ability

to hurt her where it angered her most—in the pocket—maybe she would listen to reason.

He dared not climb to her office. He would be trapped there, crippled and without a path to his horse. He rode close to a window and leaned toward it, peering, thinking he might be lucky and find her alone in the back room.

There was someone in there, all right. The shade was cracked so that he could not quite distinguish the person, but it could be female, and there were no girls in the employ of the Widow. He reached out and scratched on the windowpane.

At once he saw the gleam of metal. He ducked and the glass exploded in his face, and the voice of Simon Pease croaked, "Surrender there, yawl. We gotcha surrounded."

The effect of the shot was shocking. The marshal might have been drunk but never before had he fired at an unseen target. It could easily mean that the ban was lifted, that Jack was a target to anyone who cared to kill him.

He had not believed she would allow it. He had clung to the notion that she would try to capture him, to tame him, even to jail him—but that she would not see her son murdered.

Now he was uncertain. He swung the horse away from the window. It did not occur to him to snatch his rifle from the scabbard and begin shooting back. He saw forms moving in the darkness, felt the wind of bullets, heard sharp explosions, saw bursts of sudden fire.

Someone snarled, "Drop the goddamn nag, then we'll have him," and he thought this was Bellario. He yanked out his six-gun and fired at the voice. He spurred Bo around, the mustang took off, and they went out of the backyard of his mother's saloon.

It was a trap. Because of Polly, for some other reasons perhaps, they had been expecting him. As he fled through the street, there were men with guns. He swerved and tried to get as far away from Romano's as possible en route for the road leading to the hills. He had almost made the turn that would take him out of range when

the shot struck Bo in the rump.

Now he had to leave the road and take to the byways he knew so well. There was a moment of panic. If the horse gave out and they followed him he could never make Costello's Canyon, not with his bad leg.

On the other hand, he had no way of knowing if Bo could make it. The game pony slowed down down but did keep going, his gait steady. He was snorting and laboring a bit, but Jack knew this descendant of wild mustangs would run his heart out. He stayed in the saddle, talking in Bo's ears. He had never ridden a horse he liked better. He came to the edge of a culvert and reined in, examining the wound. It had come at fairly close quarters, he thought, and might have ranged into vital parts. Bo moved uneasily, unsteadily, and he had to remount.

He rode upward If there was pursuit he did not detect it. He wondered if he had hit anyone when he had fired at Bellario—blood revenge could be a terrific prod. Bo faltered and he again got down and listened. There were a couple of miles of hard going ahead. Anyone could catch him with ease.

He turned back to the horse. He could feel the trembling now, there was a whimper from the nostrils He stroked the neck, and Bo nuzzled him, but it was no use The legs were shaking now, the assassin's bullet had found something that would hurt. The horse was suffering.

He took out his six-gun and put a bullet through Bo's brain.

When the last echo had died away he heard, the voices, faint and far below but undoubtedly those of a posse. He stared upward, knowing the way better than anyone. He had to make it on his own. He slipped the rifle over his shoulder and began to climb.

He knew how to choose the easiest way. His bad leg would stand only so much. He had never walked when he could ride, and his leg had not developed as it should. He hopped. He sought handholds, using the strength of his overdeveloped arms and shoulders. He cursed himself

for not having followed the directions of the eastern doctors who told him how to strengthen the leg that was crippled.

He did not head straight for Costello's Canyon. It was, if one did not know the secret turnoff, a cul-de-sac where he would cause a fight between the four of them and however many of the Widow had sent after him. He did not want this. He did not want to endanger his friends nor to give away the entrance to the cave. He would, he thought, make a lone stand among the highest ridges if he had to—and knew that would bring out the boys. It would at least be better than giving up their safe hiding place.

He sweated in the cool night, climbing, resting, limping. He thought about the way it had happened, the trap, the shots that had come so close in the dark. Maybe they did not know it was Jack Wagoner they were shooting at. The point was they did not care whether it was he or not.

From now on it would be different It was no longer a game. He could be dead yet, before morning It was a new thought, and he had to face it even as he was fleeing the posse of the Black Widow.

The people from the ranch were those to be feared. They knew the hills, they knew the shortcuts, they had chased cattle all over this counntry. Dud Davis was their top man, and Dud was efficient, cold, tough. His two gunmen, Tay Gaynor and Mal Perry, were killers without conscience.

Sweating, climbing, sometimes slipping back on loose shale, he turned his mind to Polly and Buchanan. Where were they? How did they fare? If he knew where they were, he would certainly join them, come what may. He had to settle his mind about them both. About the girl who had been his confidante, and about Buchanan who had once been a genial friend.

It was bootless to worry about them. If they turned up he would know the truth. His mind went back to his mother. She had never been warm and loving, it was true. She had been very quiet, he remembered; people had

thought her shy, retiring. Yet she had been harsh enough in berating his father when things went wrong. Certainly he, as a young boy, had preferred his bluff and hearty male parent.

Then there was the accident, and his father had been crushed, repentant, pathetic. And when local doctors failed, he had insisted that Jack be sent east. That in fact all would have gone better at Denver, San Francisco, or even El Paso was not then apparent; the trip had been an irksome and enervating journey that had done him no good. And then John Wagoner had died, and the Widow became busy in her welcome new life and had kept her son in boarding schools, not interested enough to ever visit him. It was at first mainly curiosity that had brought him home. And now he knew what his mother had become. . . .

Suddenly he heard the dogs. He stopped climbing and hung by his arms for a moment.

They would be the hounds of Dud Davis. They were famous throughout the countryside for their skill in tracking animal or human. They were dun colored and utterly mean, and Dud and his help kept them that way by design.

There was no way he could escape the hounds and Dud Davis, he thought. He pulled himself up to a narrow ledge. If he were faster afoot . . . but he was not If he could make a certain stream . . . but it was too far away

He would go back to his earlier thinking. He would go as high as possible and make a stand. He would not hesitate to kill those slavering hounds. He had always hated them. And now he would certainly kill anyone who came within range.

The game of cowboys and Indians was over. He had thought he could nibble away, prove his points, and come to a logical conclusion He had learned his logic in the East where people either settled matters amicably or went to court. He had forgotten the law of his nativity: take what you can get and hold it at all cost.

He kept on climbing and limping and even running, a pathetic hobble. There was a fork in the road that

led to either the canyon or to a spot he knew about where he could hunker down and wait for the dogs—and the men. If the Black Widow wanted her son to be dead she might well get her wish—but he would take as many with him as he could manage on this dark night in the mountains.

Buchanan did not miss the commotion below. He had been watching the girl and worrying about her, and now he tightened the cinch of the saddle on Nightshade and looked to his weapons in the manner of a warrior preparing for battle.

Men were calling to one another, and he heard the baying of the hound dogs. He sat on a flat rock with the rifle on his knees, listening.

It was then the girl began to talk, rambling in the manner of those in fever. "It's no use, Jack. . . . I always thought you was wrong . . . I don't have your education, but I know you shouldn't be stealin' and all. . . . It won't convince her. . . . Nothin' will convince her. . . . My own pa and all them knuckle down to her and make her believe. . . . She believes. . . . She believes she's right . . . Damned if she is. . . . I won't give in to her if she kills me. . . . Not me. . . . Not never. . . . Don't tell me you love me, Jack. . . . I don't wanta hear it. . . . She hates me. . . . You're her son. . . . You hate her. . . . I hate her. . . . It's all messed up, but you don't love me. . . . And I don't love you . . . It's no use . . . No use. . . . No use. . . ."

Buchanan spoke gently to her. "Anything you say, Missy. Whatever. But just ride it out. You're lucky, at that. Just a shade the other way, and that bullet would've been in your brain. Just rest, take it easy."

She snored.

Time passed. The sound of animals and men came and went. They seemed to be roaming the mountainside, and Buchanan wondered. If they were after him they should have found him much sooner than this. If the dogs were any good they could find this place.

Polly said suddenly, "It's no use, Jack. . . . I just don't agree with you. . . . You can't buy justice nor happiness

nor not much of anything you can't see and touch. . . . No use. . . . No use. . . ."

Buchanan risked his little lantern again. The wound seemed clean. He got out his razor and trimmed the hair a little and bandaged her again. The fever was dying. He breathed a sigh of relief. He again wet the clean cloth and bathed her. The chills had long since subsided. She was a healthy one, all right, this long-legged girl.

He had known a lot of ladies in his time. Several had tried to marry him. He was not shy, he was not afraid; he was simply not ready to marry. It was the settling down he feared. He loved children, a comfortable house, all that—but staying in one place daunted him.

The girl struggled inside the blankets, and before he could turn away the lantern her eyes were wide and bright but perfectly sane, staring at him.

"Buchanan?"

"It's me, all right."

"Where are we at?"

"Up in the mountains."

She struggled in the folds of cloth, made a face. Her voice was mournful when she spoke to him.

"I thought you were my friend? Why you got me hog-tied like this?"

"I haven't. I mean you're not. You got hit in the head, and I had to bring you up here on the mountain and wrap you up because you got a fever, and there was a lot of bleedin' which I had to stop." He was neatly packing away all the appurtenances. The sounds of the posse were coming closer.

"Then turn me a-loose. I can't stand it to be tied down. . . ." She paused, then went on. "I'm beginnin' to remember. My own pa . . . didn't he want to lock me up?"

"For your own good," Buchanan said, restoring his implements to the saddlebag.

The girl began to roll from the blankets, ignoring the fact she was displaying a pair of extraordinarily pretty legs, shaking herself together, feeling for the wound, encountering the bandage. "My head aches."

"You near lost it," he told her.

"Close one, was it?" she stood up, balancing, wobbling, then standing straight.

"Uh-huh."

She asked, "Do I hear dogs?"

"Uh-huh." Buchanan was readying his rifle for prompt use.

"Dud Davis," she said. "They must've sent all the way to the ranch for 'em."

"Just for you and me?"

"That does seem funny," she agreed. "You didn't threaten the Widow or nothin', didja?"

"Not her personal. I might've bumped her and a couple of her people around some. Oh, and I did say I wouldn't bring in her son for a spankin' or whatever."

"That ain't enough to cause all this commotion," she said. "I wonder . . ."

"Uh-huh?"

"Well, I wondered if Jack and them might've gone in."

"I heard some shots I couldn't account for," Buchanan said. "That's while I was gettin' you up the mountain and tryin' to take care."

"Hey, I didn't thank you nor nothin'!" She was remorseful. "You really yanked me out of a tight, there."

"Nothin' to it. You talked some, by the way."

"Talked?"

"Uh-huh. About Jack and the robberies and all. How you didn't agree with him."

"Must've been right on the top of my mind. I think it's dumb. I think sooner or later him and the other kids is goin' to get killed. One way or the other, they'll get killed."

Buchanan said, "I'll have to hear about that. And about those others with Jack and all. Meantime, maybe we better look for some big, nice, safe rocks. When those dogs come a-runnin', I want to be out of reach."

"Damn hounds," said Polly Pease. "Dud's hunted as many people as he has game with them."

"Seems funny to me they don't come right on up the trail," said Buchanan. "I didn't make any effort to cover our tracks."

Both were silent for a long moment. Then Buchanan walked down the trail, rifle under his arm. He stood another space of time. He came back to where the girl sat on a flat rock, one hand to her aching skull.

"They're off in another direction. They're not headed this way at all."

"Jack," said the girl. "They're after Jack."

"Uh-huh," said Buchanan. "Then there's not much to fret about. They won't harm Jack. Mama don't want him hurt—just humiliated and beat down to his knees like all the others."

The girl said, "No."

"That's the way it's been, hasn't it?"

"Not the dogs," she said agitatedly. "Not Dud Davis. He purely hates Jack. Dud . . . he's been around so long he figures that ranch is his. She lets him run it. And he knows Jack would fire him in a minute because he's so rotten."

"Dud Davis? Never knew him to be all that bad."

"You never knew him when he went on the booze. Like my pa. And true to tell, the Widow herself with her wine! They get together and set around and think up things to devil people. No. If the hounds are out, they're after draggin' Jack in dead or alive."

"That's hard to believe."

"I know it's hard to believe. But you just better listen to me."

"You really think they're trackin' him, and they mean to shoot him?"

"Dud's got two gunthrowers. Mal Perry and Tay Gaynor. Jack would fire them two so fast it'd make your hat spin on your head. And they know it. Couple times they already come pretty close to gettin' Jack. Widow give 'em hell for it. You better believe me, Buchanan."

"Yeah." He felt safe enough up there, holding high gun on a bunch of highbinders employed by a woman whose sanity he was beginning to doubt. He had ammunition, and he held position, and the girl would be all right. He was becoming fond of the girl; she had spunk. He had no desire, however, to be responsible for her on a hunt

through the hills for Jack Wagoner just in case the young man might be in danger. It didn't make sense. It would be very dangerous.

She said, "His guys are in Costello's Canyon. But you wouldn't know where that is, of course."

"Just east of Costello's Digs," said Buchanan. "When I was here there was always people lookin' for the diggin's. Lots of people believed in a lost mine."

"Then you do know how to get there?"

"It ain't easy from here."

"But you can ride. If you know the way you might get close enough to rouse Fats and them."

"If I rousted Fats and them, chances are they'd come shootin'," said Buchanan. "This don't make any kind of sense at all, girl. We don't know they're lookin' for Jack. And if we did, we don't know where he is nor how to get to him."

"I could find Fats and them," she said. She took a wobbly step, then another. "I could ride your horse."

Buchanan said, "You could ride him if I allowed it." Nightshade would carry anyone properly introduced by his owner. The hounds were baying at something or someone down the side of the mountain. By the sound of them they had picked up a fresh trail and were closing in. If the girl had the right of things. . . . "You sure you can get to Costello's Canyon?"

"I been there often enough tryin' to talk sense into that chuckle-head Jack and Fats and Doug and Arizona. Whatever you done to my head sure put it back together again. I don't need any gun. You take the guns, and see if you can stave off the damn dogs. The boys'll come down and take care of Dud and them, believe you me."

"If I live that long," grumbled Buchanan. But he was into it. Once more he had tried for peace and failed. It was the story of his life.

He led the girl to the big black horse. He didn't have to shorten the stirrups very much, at that. She was sure a tall girl. He spoke to Nightshade who seemed a

bit dubious but was mannerly enough as Buchanan boosted Polly into the saddle.

He said dryly, "They'll probably be able to locate us by the gunfire. You might tell 'em to hurry it up a bit."

"I'll tell them plenty Damn fools," said the girl. She spoke to Nightshade differently, a cooing, coaxing tone of voice. The black pricked up his ears and moved out across the mountain range. The girl looked as if she had been born in the saddle.

Buchanan watched them until they were obscured by a clump of stunted mountain trees. Somehow he had confidence in the tall girl. She was no beauty—she had more than surface good looks, he thought. She had what was needed to survive in the rough atmosphere of Wagoner an environs.... An atmosphere that got rougher and rougher every minute, he thought, as the noise of the dogs and the men came closer and closer.

He moved away from the stream, in the opposite direction of that taken by the girl on Nightshade. He sought only high ground, he had no notion of evading this fight. His credo was simple: avoid trouble at any cost . . . almost.

He had taken a vast dislike to the Black Widow and those around her. He had learned to admire the girl Polly. He felt sympathy, if not complete understanding, for the youngster Jack Wagoner. His course of procedure lay clear: he had to stave off attack and perhaps kill some dogs. He would rather not kill the dogs, but necessity knew no boundaries at this juncture. The dogs could track Nightshade and the girl.

He began to note a slightly different tone in the baying of the hounds. He sat upon a large, round rock, rifle across his lap, six gun in his belt. He listened. He was a man of the outdoors, of the hills and the plains and the woods and the rivers and the desert. Every sound had for him a different meaning.

The dogs were no longer coming straight up the trail toward the spot where he had just taken leave of the girl. They were shading off in his direction—yet it was absolutely impossible that they should have picked up

his scent at this distance. He moved with care, cradling the rifle, shading the moonlight from his eyes with the brim of his hat. There was other game afoot.

He thought about this for a while. Then he went down from his high place for a hundred yards, recalling the terrain, thinking what was best for a fugitive being chased by a posse and a pack of hound dogs. He remembered a sort of natural bridge he had noted on his journey to this part of the mountains. It lay sprawled, slightly precarious as to balance, somewhere ahead of him on his present course. It would be a good place to make a desperate stand.

One thing was for sure: if the other fugitive were climbing he was afoot. This was no land for horses, it was too steep, too full of shale, loose rock, thick mountain brush, stunted trees. The moon cast weird shadows as Buchanan sought the place of the natural bridge.

He came to it at last. The sound of pursuit was quite close by then. He stretched himself on the flat top of the bridge. There was no water below, merely a small *arroyo* leading nowhere. Buchanan attuned his ears to the reverberations of this place and waited.

There was a scrambling below him. Then there was a pause and stertorous breathing. A man coughed, choked. Slowly a figure took form in the moonlight.

Buchanan called softly, "That you, Jack Wagoner?"

The figure swung, revolver pointing upward. "Who's there?"

"Tom Buchanan. Be careful with that gun."

"Buchanan? How do I know it's you?"

"Your father'd know. We rassled together often enough, him and me."

"Who always won?"

"Why, I did," said Buchanan. "John was a sucker for a half nelson and a kip."

"All right, Buchanan," said Jack hoarsely. "How do I know you're not up here to bring me home . . . back to my mother?"

"Because if I was, all I'd have to do is wait for them hounds to catch up and join the party."

"Did Davis's dogs. Damn them," said Jack. He was near the end of his tether. "They shot my horse, the bastards."

"Figured that," said Buchanan. "I sent Polly Pease off on my horse, to tell your boys about it."

"That's another thing. What about her? Polly?"

Buchanan said, "You know what? You better let me give you a hand up here and then we'll talk. Them dogs is gettin' closer. I sorta hate to shoot a dog doin' what he's trained to do."

"I don't need your help." Jack reached with one hand, got a hold, and drew himself up. It was as easy as pulling in a small catfish on a heavy line, Buchanan thought. The boy was stronger than two men. They stared at one another as the clouds scurried across the sky, touched the moon, bounced off.

"So. You growed some," said Buchanan.

"You were always grown—bigger than anybody," Jack said without particular warmth. "What about Polly?"

"She got hit in the head."

"Hit? By whom?"

"By some sonofabitch with a gun,'" Buchanan said. "I toted her outa there. Thought she'd be better off up in the hills."

"Her father in on it?"

"Uh-huh."

"And my mother?"

"Yep. Ain't your ma in on everything around and about?'"

"She is. . . . So you brought Polly up here and fixed her head and sent her to find me?"

"Had an idea you wasn't around," Buchanan told him. "I get notions like that sometimes."

"She told you."

"She didn't talk a lot. Anyway, I figured there was twenty, thirty people down there. With dogs. Any little help we could get would be fine with me."

"You could've got yourself killed, Buchanan. Those

boys don't trust anybody, least of all someone who's been talking with my mother."

"You'll have to fill me in on those boys," said Buchanan. "Right now I seem to see some folks comin' in this direction."

"I've only got a .45," Jack said.

"How bad do you want to kill these folks?" Buchanan asked. "Because it could come down to a lot of killin'."

"I don't want to kill, not anyone, not any time," retorted Jack. "This is not my doing."

"Just askin'," said Buchanan. He aimed and fired. Down below a figure jumped behind a tree, and a voice called out in fear. Buchanan went on. "For instance, that one was easy. Could've had him in the head."

"That was Marshal Pease," said Jack. "That was Polly's father."

"I know," Buchanan agreed. "You think we oughta kill a dog?"

"They can't get at us," said Jack. "I damn well ought to kill somebody. They got my favorite mount."

"On t' other hand, they didn't get you," said Buchanan.

"They tried hard enough."

"And they damn near got Polly."

"They'll pay for it."

"Money? You goin' to steal 'em blind?"

"Give me time, I'll bring her . . . them . . . to their knees. I'll have them begging for mercy!"

Buchanan said, "Time "Uh huh. You got to get 'em before they can dig out more gold and sell more cattle. And you're goin' to do all this with just the four of you operatin' from Costello's Canyon?"

"You know a whole hell of a lot about us, don't you, Buchanan?"

"Hope to know a lot more. Y' see, your ma don't like me no more, neither. First she wanted me to come and bring you home like a bad little kid. Then she wanted to make an example of Polly Pease. Now she sure wants my hide."

"How can I be certain of that?"

"Son, if you ain't, you're a damn sight dumber than

your pa ever was. And that I doubt. You wanta fire a few shots? It might give 'em a notion not to start circlin' over yonder. Wouldn't want 'em to think they can get high gun."

Jack drew his six-gun and fired it, emptying the chambers in the direction they had last heard voices and the barking of the dogs. Buchanan then sent several rifle bullets whining down into the shadows.

A shattering silence fell upon the mountain, and the pursuers took cognizance of the fact that there might be more than one victim to face. Buchanan went on conversationally. "Your ma has to con every man in her bailiwick into doin' what she wants. If she don't get 'em one way, she nails 'em another. It ain't the man she wants, nothin' simple like that. It's what can he do for her. That the way you see it?"

After a moment Jack said, "That's the way it is. It didn't take you long to figure it out, did it?"

"She makes it right plain," said Buchanan. The boy was still suspicious; it was in his voice. There was no use trying to convince him of anything at this juncture. Best they should meet up with Polly and the others, then Buchanan could retrieve Nightshade and be on his way. This whole shebang was getting to be none of his business.

"They like it. All the ones she feeds. They think she's a great person."

"Uh huh," said Buchanan. He was carefully watching the patches of moonlight below them. Something moved and he fired offhand. There was a howl of amazed rage and pain.

"You, Jack!" shrieked the voice of Marshal Pease. "Your ma wants you in town right now! You got to quit this foolishment afore someone gets hurt bad!"

Buchanan nudged the youth to silence. "That you Simon, you old fool?"

"Buchanan? Now, dammit, Buchanan, you got somethin' to answer for. You got my only begotten daughter there somewheres. I call you to account, you Tom Buchanan."

"And I tell you to get your butt out of range, Simon,"

Buchanan answered. "You caterwaulin' old tomcat, you don't deserve a daughter. You don't deserve nothin' but a bullet, and if you don't take Dud's dogs and that crew out of here I'm likely to forget I'm a peaceable man."

There was a scrambling noise, then from farther away Pease was yelling, "He's up there! Buchanan's up there! Send them dogs or somebody and git him!"

Pat Prince's heavy basso responded. "Go up yourself, you old fool. He ain't alone up there."

"They're gettin' real clever," Buchanan said. "They figure there's more'n one of us."

Another voice, reedy, accustomed to flinging itself against a wind, called, "We'll have them offen there in jug time. Just you gents stay out of the way. Perry . . . Gaynor . . . you Gonzales. Flush 'em down offen there."

Buchanan said, "Dud knows where we are and everything. Now, ain't he cute?"

"Should we fire on them again?"

"Hell, no," Buchanan said. "We go higher. We hit the ridge. Then we wait for help."

"If they can find us."

"Hell, son, they got to find us if we make enough noise," said Buchanan. "C'mon, now."

He shoved Jack Wagoner ahead of him. They came down off the natural bridge and began to climb the side of the mountain. It was tough going for Jack, but Buchanan neither tried to pass him nor offered to help him. The guns were crashing below splintering the place they had just vacated.

"Don't want to hurt us, huh?" grunted Buchanan as they climbed. "Come home to mama, is it?"

"They weren't fooling when they killed my horse," Jack panted, testing for a moment. He opened and closed his powerful hands. "They must be taught a lesson."

"One of them is nursin' a lesson right now," said Buchanan. "There'll be more before this night's over. That is if Polly and your people wake up and get a movin'."

"We'd better keep climbing. There are some pines up high, atop the ridge."

"I remember them." There was also a narrow trail that led to the pines. Men could ride that trail even at night if they knew it well enough.

Dud Davis stood round shouldered and bowlegged among his pack of hounds. Tony Gonzales restrained them with a short, loaded whip. The Widow had driven her light wagon to the clearing, as far into the mountains as it would go. She sat, clad in black as always, her face very white in the light of the moon flickering through the leaves of the trees.

"Who got hurt?" she asked.

Just one of the hands." Dud shrugged and spat tobacco juice. "Buchanan's up there. That sonofabitch, you know how he is in a tight."

"I know."

"Your kid's up there, too."

"And you can't get them down from there?"

"I was aimin' to, when you drove up. But you know how it has got to be done."

"Yes," she said. "Shoot 'em."

"Might be we have to shoot 'em all to hell."'

"Can't be helped," she said. Her voice was deliberate. "It's gone too far. He's outside the law, Dud. He's cut all the ties. Everybody's tried to save him. We been playin' games with him. It's got to stop."

"Just what I've been saying' right along," agreed Dud. "But the girl —she's up there, too."

Simon Pease said, "Now wait, You ain't goin to kill me daughter!"

"You already damn near did," said the Widow.

"That was a mistake. I just meant to jail her for a while to keep her outa trouble."

"She took up with Jack," said the Widow. "I swear she tipped him off to when the payrolls were comin' through. She did everything but ride with 'em. And how do we know she didn't do that, too?"

"She didn't," said Pease loudly. "I'd know it if she did. Locky, I wouldn't mind jailin' her for a while. Take

some of them pert manners from her. But kill her? No, that ain't right."

"It ain't certain that she'll be hurt." The Widow altered her tone. "Tell you what, Simon. You take the dogs and go to the ranch. Dud'll handle things here."

"My daughter's been hurt enough. By me. Just because your son's been stealin' don't make her no thief!"

"Back to the ranch. We don't need the hounds. Leave 'em and you go on back to town," said the Widow gently. She reached out to him. "Here, I brought some of the good stuff. Take it. Do Like I tell you, now."

He accepted the bottle. For a moment it seemed he would hurl it to the ground. Dud Davis moved and the two guns dangling from his belt creaked in the low-cut leather holsters.

Simon Pease uncorked the bottle. He swallowed, his Adam's apple bobbing. The Widow spoke softly in his ear.

"That's right, Simon. Calm yourself. Nobody's goin' to do anything that ain't right. You swore these men in as deputies. You know the law, and what's right for the country . . . and for me."

"Yes'm," said Simon. He drank again. It was smooth, aged whiskey. "You right, Rose. I'll get them dogs home. Then I'll go to town and get the jail ready. You-all bring in those boys. Just don't kill my daughter, Rose. There's no call to do that. Make sure."

"We'll do that, Simon."

"I'll have the jail all clean for her. Heh-heh. My own daughter. But the younguns have to learn. I'll do it, Rose. You right, Rose."

He started away but she stopped him. "I'll take the bottle, Simon. Otherwise you won't make the ranch—nor any other place."

"Okay . . .Okay." He swayed down the trail. The dogs followed him at a command from Dud Davis. He had his own flat pint somewheres on his person as everyone was aware, but he would be able to navigate with no more than that amount in him.

The Widow addressed her ranch foreman. "Dud, you

do like I say. If the fool girl gets in the way of another bullet, I couldn't give a hoot in hell."

"Like Simon says, 'You right, Rose,' " said Davis. "I been waitin' for the word. Jack just went wrong."

"It's all his father's fault. Sendin' him back east to the doctors and the schools and all. Spoiled him rotten."

"That they did. He's got no respect."

"Not that I want him dead, heaven forbid," she said. "I want him alive."

"I'll do my best."

"But Buchanan could be spared."

"And the gal?"

"If she gets in the way."

"Oh, she'll be in the way. She ain't like her old man, you know."

"I don't know who she's like. I know she's a big nuisance and my son is a bigger nuisance. I know we've got to get things in order," said the Widow. "What's important is the ranch and the mine and the town business we got goin'. We don't want those other little ranchers buttin' in. We don't want a gold rush. We don't want any outsiders in on anything."

"I been chasin' 'em out fast as they poke their nose in," Davis said. "If Pat Prince and that wop Bellario stay on the job and keep outa my way, everything'll be all right. You mark my words, Rose. I'm the one can keep things the way you want 'em to be kept."

"I believe you, Dud." She patted his arm. He strutted, bandy-legged, standing still. He was a man of huge vanity. He had enormous confidence in himself and his ability. He had been running the Flying W since the death of John Wagoner and had begun to think of himself as the Widow's partner—her only true partner. She said, "Turn your men loose. Get Buchanan."

"I'll do just that, you betcha." He went to give orders to his people.

She sat in the carriage and thought about it all. She would not be unhappy if Buchanan, whom she never underestimated for a moment, should in losing his own life take Dud along with him. Dud was getting too big for

his britches. He sneered at Simon Pease, but the marshal was more to the taste of the Widow than was Davis Simon knew his place and was easily controlled.

Pat Prince was a fool, but he was her fool. He obeyed orders even as he yapped a lot. Bellario was an indoor man, a city man with a certain amount of brains but far more canny than he was brilliant He was not forward-looking. Sooner or later she might also have to dispose of him.

She headed the horse down the mountainside. Although it was night, she was conscious of her hands. She could dress herself up from the top of her hairdo to the soles of her small feet, but there was nothing she could do about her hands. They were thick and heavy from the hard work of all her younger years The callouses were gone, but the knuckles were knobby. She had scraped and polished the nails, but the wrists were thick and strong, like those of a young man. No amount of rose water and glycerin could remove them far enough from the beginnings of things back in Sacramento.

Her father had been a hard-rock miner. Her mother had died when she was three, a tiny woman not able to withstand the rigors of the camps. Rose had been cared for by the washerwomen, the overworked wives, and finally the madam of the biggest whorehouse in Leadville.

It was from the kitchen of the whorehouse that John Wagoner had rescued her. She had not yet progressed to the front parlor. She was sixteen, but so small that no one guessed her true age. She had hurled herself at the young, ever hungry, happy-go-lucky miner-cowboy.

And she had made him successful, this nobody could deny. Failing to locate Costello's Digs, he had wanted to wander on, but she had seen the design of the country —the way it was cut off, away from close neighbors, with grama grass growing to the belly of the fat heifers—and she had made him take up sections, then buy the land he did not lease. He had lucked into the Blackjack diggings, and she had forced him to borrow from the banks to keep it going and then to build the stamp mill and import the Mexicans and the European immigrants. . . . It

had all been her planning, while she sat out at the ranch and he fooled away time and money in Wagoner—and on trips to San Francisco, Chicago, and wherever else it suited his fancy to chase the women.

Now it was her turn. In her son she saw only another John Wagoner, crossing her, arguing with her, sneering at her. In the girl Polly she saw herself when she was young: uneducated, fit only for the kitchen and the yard work . . . and not even a pretty girl. In the men about her she saw only weaknesses that she could exploit.

She saw danger in only one direction—from Buchanan. She drove back to town at a slow pace, thinking deeply.

CHAPTER FOUR

BUCHANAN said, "This is as good a place as any. I like the trees. And there's enough rock to build a fort."

"The trail's awfully narrow," said Jack Wagoner. "But I don't want to work closer to . . ." He broke off.

He was still suspicious, Buchanan knew. He would not mention the hideout. He was not certain that Buchanan knew its exact whereabouts. He was probably confident that in any case Buchanan could not break into it, would be finally discouraged and leave the country.

The trouble with young Wagoner, Buchanan thought, was that he resembled his mother. He had one idea in his head and no room for more. He was intent on "Justice For All." He would give his life for the cause.

His ma was for Justice, all right. Justice As She Saw It—for the Widow Wagoner.

"Justice," he found himself murmuring, "is somethin' like Truth. Might find it at the bottom of a well."

Jack Wagoner asked, "What was that?"

"Just a general remark," said Buchanan. "I smell

trouble. Like I said, trees are right good. Let me shinny up here and take a look."

"If they block the trail they'll split us up." He kept glancing toward the west.

Buchanan said, "I was thinkin' of that myself." He jumped up, caught a branch of the pine, and drew himself to the lowest reaches. At that moment a volley of shots tore into the needles and scattered them like gentle rain. He dropped back to earth and said, "Just a tiny bit late with that. Guess we might's well stop foolin' with those people."

He waited for another volley. It came, and he picked up the flash of several guns within the periphery of his vision. He dealt out lead with care, calling upon his vast experience in like situations.

Again there were cries in the night. A random cloud began to drift near the moon. Buchanan fired again. He heard Dud Davis yell an order, and there was thrashing in the brush.

He said to Jack, "Maybe you better go back along that trail. Your gun's no use here in this light, at this distance from them."

"I don't like to desert you."

"You just go 'long," said Buchanan. "Don't waste lead on them. Find your people and make a flankin' move if you can. I'll manage from here."

"Can you do it alone?"

"I been alone a heap in my time, son," said Buchanan. "Got the scars to prove it. Git, now, while there's a lull."

Jack Wagoner hesitated. Then he said, "I reckon it's best. You know the meadowlark?"

"Won't find any up this high."

"That's why you should recognize the sound if we get that close."

"I'll recognize it," said Buchanan. "Get goin'."

He sighted at an imagined sound and fired the rifle. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Jack leave, his head bobbing up, then down as he tried to make time. It was a sad sight. Buchanan intuitively understood many things

about the youth when perceiving that awkward gait, remembering the straight-legged, strong little boy.

He felt the bullets raining about him, heard the zing and the muzzle explosions of too many guns. He moved his position to the tree again, this time got his legs up and found adequate support at its stunted top. The point of view was better here, and the little cloud continued its course across the face of the moon, and he saw dark spots below that could only be people.

He emptied the rifle, not aiming, letting fate be the judge of which shape should take a bullet. He saw them scatter, dropped down from the tree, and returned to a rock big enough to hide most of his bulk. He had high gun, and this was the biggest advantage anyone could have in a gunfight. He knew it, and Dud Davis knew it just as well. Davis would have to do something about it.

That was where Jack Wagoner and his friends should come in. If they did not there was a very good chance that Tom Buchanan, veteran of a hundred frontier engagements, might find a lonely death in the mountains where he had come to seek peace and recreation.

Furthermore he had wandered into the most hopeless situation for an outsider—a family quarrel. There could be no satisfactory ending of this for him. He sympathized with the boy, he thought the woman was possibly a bit insane—but it was not his family. As for justice, he was not a man to sit in judgment. He had no belief in blacks and whites. All arguments seemed to him to be just a bit gray.

At this very moment he had no great desire to shoot Dud Davis or any of the other people down below. He was merely defending himself. The very best thing that could happen would be that he regain his black horse and his saddlebags and depart from Wagoner with all possible speed. He had friends to visit, time to spend. He missed Coco Bean, the black man who was always such a comfort—and a challenge.

He moved again. But they were not firing upon him now, they were moving on their part, and he surmised they would be coming up, out of range of his gun,

cutting the trail. Another group would be going the long way to get above him, to the next range of the mountain, to deprive him of his advantage of high gun. Dad Davis was a veteran of range wars; he knew his business.

It was an unsightly mess any way you looked at it.

Then Buchanan thought of the girl. On the most brief acquaintance he had taken a great liking to Polly Pease. Her father had always been a bit of a bum, but her mother had been a pleasant, unbeautiful woman, another frontier wife, a hard worker, silent, unquestioning. The daughter was an only child young enough to be Buchanan's. Well, his niece, he temporized.

The silence was becoming too thick. He slipped along a wall of rock. He waited, listening. He heard the sound of a bird, not very well imitated. It might have been the meadowlark signal, and then again it might not. He waited.

The call was repeated. He was not certain how to make such a sound, so he whistled instead. There was immediate response to this. There was the sound of clattering hooves. Buchanan cursed himself.

He should have known Nightshade was with the Wagoner people and the girl. Nightshade always came at the sound of that whistle.

Shots came peppering against the rocks, sending splinters against Buchanan's hat and his shoulders. As the moon went under the clouds the girl came riding the big black horse. She seemed to be alone.

Buchanan caught the bridle and spoke in low tones to the horse. The girl slid down, staggered a little, leaned against the stone wall. They were actually on a narrow ledge, part of a path winding northward and westward. Buchanan supported the girl with one hand.

She said, "Jack and them . . . they're droppin' down and doin' like you said? Flankin' them or something?"

Buchanan said, "Fine. But what's the matter with you?"

"Just . . . dizzy. My head . . ." She began to slide down the wall of rock.

Buchanan said, "Hey, this is no good at all."

He heard the noise as the Wagoner youths made their run at the people below. He asked, "Does this road go anywhere?"

"Just . . . just over the mountain. . . ."

He said, "Okay. Good enough."

He put her on the saddle and got up behind her. It was awkward and for her very uncomfortable because of the big, curving pommel, but he dared not put her up behind for fear she would faint and fall. He set Nightshade on the road they must have traversed to get to him and gave the black his head.

He turned in the saddle a moment, but he could see nothing of the engagement below. If he fired he might hit Wagoner or some of his people. There was only one thing to do, and that was to protect the girl. The middle of a gunfight was not the place for it. He sent Nightshade up over the top of the mountain.

The girl said indistinctly, "I wanted them . . . come to you. . . . Jack said . . . Jack said . . ."

"I know. I told him a flank attack would be the best way to go." But meantime there were men trying to get high gun and they might be encountered at any moment.

She said, "I don't . . . think . . . Jack trusts you. . . ."

"Had the same notion myself," he told her. "Seems like your fever come back. Let's not think about Jack and them."

"He don't . . . trust me . . . neither." She sounded more nettled than angry. "Sometimes he ain't got a lick o' sense, seems like."

"Never mind, now." He had other matters to dwell upon. She was probably in love with the kid, and Buchanan's job was to save her from whatever danger lay ahead and possibly to bring them together again. Possibly. . . .

Jack Wagoner reined in beside Fats Willow. Their guns still smoked. There was the sound of flight ahead of them.

"More damn shootin' and less killin'," said Fats. "Buchanan must've put the fear into 'em."

"I don't know. It's confusing. I think they wanted to get me, dead or alive. It seemed that way." He dashed a hand across his face. "I hope Polly's all right."

"Should've left her in the canyon," Fats said. "The fever was on her for sure."

"She wouldn't stay, damn her! She had to get back to that damn Buchanan and bring his horse along."

"T'other way about, pardner," said Fats. "That horse is one to bring her along. Or you or me or anybody. That's some kind of a horse."

"And I lost Bo," said Jack. "Look, there's nobody around here. Whistle the boys in."

"And leave Buchanan and Polly?"

"I'm not worried about them," said Jack flatly. "Best we should get back to the hideout and see what happens when Mother knows she didn't get me. Nor Polly."

Fats said, "If you say so." He gave the signal. The other two acknowledged it. They turned and rode for Costello's Canyon. It was necessary to hasten and to clear out anyone who might be between them and their hideout. Everyone knew there was a Costello's Canyon, but not everyone knew how to get there, and almost no one was able to get in.

Jack thought of Buchanan. He would like to believe in the big man. To have Buchanan on his side would be a coup indeed. It might make the difference; it might convince his mother that he was right, that a big change in the order of life around the town, the ranch, and the mines was in order.

He was afraid to trust anyone save the trio who rode with him. He knew their loyalty, even when they did not understand what he was about, what was his real intent. They believed he would find a place for them in the new life and that was enough for them. They were not educated. They respected his knowledge, his philosophy. They believed in him as their leader.

It was enough. He could go on. Polly would never quite understand; he had given up hopes of that. He had

always thought that Polly was a part of it, that she would marry him, and they would settle into the places meant for them in a world he would improve to fit his sense of justice.

He could not think of her without a wrench at his heart. He knew her virtues and her value. She had fought alone for years, against the domination of the Widow and the subjugation of her father, against poverty. She had helped the people who needed help, turning no one away hungry, doing needed tasks for the sick. She was one in a million. . . . The only one he knew, to tell the truth, who came close to meeting his standards.

His high ideals had been forged in hospital beds while the medicos of the eastern institutions were endeavoring to preserve his mangled leg. There had been nothing to do but read, and nothing to read but heavy books that a head nurse fed to him and tried to explain to him. When he could be moved this same lady had taken him on tours of the wards where the indigent were cared for, pointing out the inequities of a system that left so many without adequate medical care.

Lacking a family life to balance his experiences, unable to completely recover from his accident, he had for a long while turned inward, unable to cope with people after leaving the hospital, feeling lost and inferior at school because he could not indulge in the sporting activities of the other boys.

It was another nurse, a male at the school, who started him with weight lifting and chin-ups and the other acrobatics possible in a gymnasium. He had gone into a program with huge energy and determination. It was about that time that John Wagoner began to make a lot of money, and Jack was able to buy a horse. With his enormous strength of torso and arms he had been able to find his place in the world—astride a good saddle, riding in the wind, the finest of horseflesh beneath him.

Then he had returned home before his twenty-first birthday because of rumors, a scrawled letter from Fats,

and a newspaper dispatch about "The Widow of Wagoner," all of which had shaken him to his soul.

There was a flurry ahead and below the narrow trail. Without orders Arizona and Doug took off, riding furiously down with guns drawn.

Fats said, riding close beside Jack, "Them boys are gettin' a bit randy, you know."

"I know." It was a constant problem. Only Fats was content to remain in the canyon, playing card games, singing songs around the fire, occasionally slipping away to Tucson, or El Paso, or some other distant town to sample the wares of the saloons and whorehouses. The other pair wanted to "git somewhere" by robbing the mine, the bank, the whole town, in one fell swoop. Then they could go where they pleased, do what they pleased.

Which would be to blow the loot and start all over again as outlaws in another place, Jack had warned them time and again. So long as they plied their trade here and gave to the poor, they were like a hero of ancient days of whom Jack had read in one of the few lightweight books of his hospital sojourn, one Robin Hood. And in the end his mother would give in, call for a truce, and allow him to administer their holdings the way he thought correct, the humanitarian way. He had believed this.

Fats said, "They were truly gunnin' for us tonight. For Buchanan, too."

"Yes. They killed Bo."

"That coulda been an accident. But I don't think so." The youth knew the country, knew the people. He had a sharp mind, keen enough to understand Jack's motivation. "I think we're runnin' out of time."

"Out of time?"

"I think your ma is gettin' impatient. Like she tried to hire Buchanan. He's strong medicine."

"That's why I let Polly get to him. She trusts him."

"But you don't."

"I don't dare," Jack confessed.

"You may have to."

"If he brings Polly to us, we'll have to trust him."

Fats said, "Here come the boys. No shootin', so it must be a clear path ahead."

They rode. The way into their part of the canyon was silent as the tomb. They made the tricky route easily, from long habit. Even Buchanan could not find his way here, Jack thought. Sooner or later they would have to ride out and find Polly.

And a horse. The wild bunch in the hills had a leader, a beautiful stallion that he had spotted lately, that would take a lot of tracking and breaking. He could ride the grulla. He might be able to manage it during the hiatus that must follow this latest fight—his mother would bide her time to regroup and make new plans, he imagined.

The horse—he had to have the best horse available, the best around. Nightshade had impressed him, but he could never have Nightshade, he knew. The stallion would do very nicely. He kept his mind on the horse and away from Polly and Buchanan as he made for the hideout.

Buchanan led the black horse off the trail. He steadied the girl in the saddle and squinted at the sky. The clouds were still moving, making a beautiful picture—one which he could have very well done without. He stopped at a safe place and lifted the girl down. She was unconscious now, her fever raging. He made certain the bleeding had not started again and sat her against a tall pine.

There was danger nearby. His long association with the specter gave him an extra sense which could detect the presence of hunters. Men were on the trail.

He took his rifle and reluctantly began a scout. He hated to leave the girl, but he knew they would be sitting ducks if he did not locate the source of the danger. He went back to the trail and lay behind a clump of rough brush and waited, watching the sky with one eye, the road with the other.

The clouds pushed on. The pale moon shone. Two men came up the trail afoot, carrying weapons. He did not recognize them.

He called softly, "That's far enough."

They stopped in their tracks.

He said, "Back down the hill. And fast."

One of them said, "The hell with you."

Those were his last words for that night, possibly forever. Buchanan shot him in the shoulder, knocking him backwards. He levered the rifle and fired again. The second man managed to trigger his gun even as he screamed and went down, clutching a shattered knee.

The Widow would have a lot to answer for this night, Buchanan thought, waiting to see if there were others. Beginning with the wounding of Polly, she had been responsible for at least a few deaths and some crippling of men struck with hot lead. He wondered if she cared, or if she was beyond caring.

No further enemy reconnoiter seemed afoot. He went back to Polly. She opened her eyes but scarcely recognized him.

"Jack is wrong. . . . I keep tellin' him. . . . " She was off on her recriminations against young Wagoner again. Buchanan had heard it all by now.

He asked gently, "Can you take me to the hideout?"

"He couldn't win. . . . An army of men wouldn't make her change," Polly said. She spoke clearly enough, but she seemed unable to comprehend Buchanan's question.

"If I could get you down there, get some shelter and food, maybe medicine. Jack's bound to have supplies."

She said, "The Widow's got 'em all. Only four kids from the whole countryside. . . . Everybody else is under her evil eye. . . . The Black Widow. . . . Goddamn her soul to hell."

"Sure, that's right," said Buchanan. "Strong language, but the notion is correct. Now, if you can tell me the trick of how to get into the hideout."

She suddenly snored, limp and forlorn on the hillside. He leaned close to her, feeling her forehead. The fever raged. He could not care for her properly for a long time, he knew. He had two alternatives: he could take her into town and try to bully people—force them to

care for her; or he could make an effort to find the hideout in Costello's Canyon.

He put the tall girl on the big horse and turned back to the trail. He passed the two men, one silent, the other groaning They never saw him pass. He went back to the narrow road that led to Costello's Canyon. Carefully he made his way along the narrow path, until he came to the spot with which he was familiar from long ago, when people were still searching for Costello's Digs.

Gold had never been the target for Buchanan, although upon at least one occasion he had profited by the defense of a mine in another mountainous country. He had left Wagoner during the height of the Costello Digs excitement, not believing in a purported old map discovered by an enterprising hardware merchant who had shovels and picks and wheelbarrows for sale. Yet there seemed to be some basis for the saga of Costello, one among many of the early prospectors who had turned up with high-grade ore and a fanciful story—and had then mysteriously vanished.

It was not the Digs he sought now, of course. It was the hideout in the Canyon He followed the old trail without further challenge. He came to the entrance to the arroyo, the one known to most people.

Again he asked the girl, "How do you go from here? Can't you give me some notion, Polly, darlin'?"

Slumped in the saddle, she murmured, "Wrong . . . it's all wrong. . . . School don't teach everything, seems like . . . . Rustlin' and robbin' Peter to pay Paul. . . . The Bible says it's wrong, Jack. Even the Bible says it. . . ."

"You are right, honey," he said. "But it ain't doin' us a heap of good right this minute. What I got to do is think back. Ten years or more. That's a heap of thinkin' for a man."

"Buchanan can help," she murmured on. "I know he can. . . . He's a man. . . . I told you so, Jack. . . . I know you didn't . . . like it. . . . You never do . . . never do. . . . You always think you know it all, Jack"

Buchanan said, "When I was his age it's amazin' how

smart I was. Now, let me see, the canyon starts here and goes straight west. Well, almost straight. Now, they must have a hidey hole where they don't even need a guard all the time. If they had a guard I could find him. That I could do. And if they know you're needin' help, and we are hereabouts . . . well, I expect they'd be willin'. Not for me, mind you. But for you, they'd do what is needed."

She said, "It's all the Widow's fault. . . . The Widow takes everything from everybody. The Widow is wicked. . . . Wicked, wicked Widow. . . ."

"You're right even when you're out of your mind, girl," Buchanan said. "If you could only just give me a hint as to where I'd find those boys. Or if it was daytime. Or even if those clouds would stay away from the moon."

"The thing to do," she said in her dreamy, far-off voice "is go away and use your education. . . . Don't worry about me . . . . I've always took care of myself. . . . I got Pa to worry about, and I'm used to it. . . . Used to it. . . . Used to it. . . ." She ended with a slight sob in her voice.

Buchanan lifted her down from the horse. He was mighty hungry, and there was some small graze, and he had to let Nightshade crop a little of it, and he had to get the girl to warmth and comfort and medicine. There was no water in the canyon that he knew about. . . .

"That's it," he said. "They got to have water. So wherever it is . . . it could be an underground stream but if it is . . . then where does it come from? If it was only light enough!"

It was not. The clouds still played their game of scudding around in the high wind. It was becoming colder on the mountain as the night deepened. He got out his blankets and again wrapped the girl and lay her gently beneath a piñon tree. Only the small sounds of nature were now on the air.

There wasn't a lick of sense in charging up and down Costello's Canyon searching for the entrance to a hideout. He had to think it through. The aggravation of knowing that the girl, now sleeping lightly and restlessly, could

lead him there if she were in her right mind had to be put firmly aside. It was a time to reason before acting.

He fetched his canteen from the saddle and went to the girl. Her lips were dry and beginning to crack He moistened them, parted her lips by gently pinching her jaw, managed to pour a few ounces of the liquid into her without choking her. He drank himself, replaced the canteen, then sat down beside the girl, and deliberately turned his mind back to the time when he had last been in this place, a decade ago.

Polly opened her eyes and said quite lucidly, "The water."

"Just gave you water, baby," Buchanan said. Then he realized she was not talking about the canteen. He asked, "Where does it start?"

Her eyes clouded over. "I keep tellin' all of them. . . . Arizona, he'd like to take off. . . . But I don't know about him . . . I don t know. . . . Jack, he's wrong. . . . Jack is—"

"The wat'r," he urged. "You mean the creek?"

She became unintelligible and suddenly snored. He wiped her brow again with the damp rag. She would go into chills at any moment, he thought. He had to remember where the stream had been.

He sat with his head down, a small stick in his hand. He drew lines he could not really follow in the dust of the trail. The real map lay somewhere in the cells of his memory.

He tried to remember the terrain of the canyon. John Wagoner had been intent on Costello's Digs, but Buchanan had never been in a place he did not consciously register upon his mind. It was an old, defensive habit. He never knew when he might be on the same path again, this time in danger.

There was a stream, there had to be, but he had not seen it when he was with Wagoner. They had to have water in the hideout. He repeated the fact again and again. What he must do now was to deduct from his memory of the canyon the spots where water might come down from the mountain above. Polly could tell him—if she was conscious and sane.

He said, "John was talkin' about the gold. He believed it was there, but he went over this here canyon with a rake, almost and didn't find a sign of a dig. So . . . maybe it was a placer. . . ." He broke off, thoughtful. Polly had meant the water in the hideout; that was certain. It could not be close to any place where Wagoner and Buchanan had searched.

He said, "Well, I dunno, but here goes nothin'."

He picked up the girl, tucked the blanket in so that it did not drag, and whistled to Nightshade. The black horse followed him along the trail. They went deep into the canyon like that. The moon poked its head out from the clouds again.

Buchanan stopped. He could see a little bit of the ground. There was no track. He put Polly down and knelt, feeling the dirt and shale, sifting it through his fingers. He stared at stunted fir trees beneath which was sparse brush.

He said, "Uh huh. Clever, these kids."

He picked up the girl and walked past the trees. He came to a sharp edge of rock which rose a hundred feet. He walked around that, and then he put the girl on his wide left shoulder and his hand on his six-gun and strolled between two blocks of sandstone that seemed not to have room between them. The moon went under Buchanan kept going. They had used blankets to cover the track, dragging them, weighted, behind their horses. It was neat but not gaudy, he thought. He had seen better hidey holes. He could hear the water plainly. It came tumbling down smartly and merrily, covering any sound made by Buchanan or Nightshade as they made the last turn.

They could see the fire, now. The stream ran into a hole again and was gone, diverted by hard labor, Buchanan imagined. All mountain creeks were tricky. This one had been helped along its meandering, secret way.

He walked right in among them. They came to their feet, reaching, and he put the six gun on them.

He said. "Don't anybody try it. I got us a sick gal here, a mighty brave, mighty nice gal."

He bent his knees and tenderly stretched out Polly in the blanket. He did not take his eyes off the quartet of young men.

He said, "Kind of a dirty trick, runnin' off here and leavin' us, now, wasn't it?"

Jack Wagoner found his tongue. "I know you'd be all right. I know how you are."

Buchanan said, "Then you better tell that fellow over there, the mean lookin' one."

Jack said, "Arizona. He'll kill you if he has to."

"That's all right. I'm a peaceable soul, but this gal needs help, and I'm hungry as hell," Buchanan told them. "If I got to keep you all in my eye, then that's the way it'll be done."

"It'll not be like that," Wagoner promised. He went to Polly and knelt at her side. There was no mistaking the gentle tenderness of his hands. "Fats. The medicine chest." He looked up at Buchanan. "Fever had her for long?"

"This is the second attack." Buchanan holstered his gun with a sigh of relief. "Didn't you study medicine for a while back east? Or somethin' like it?"

"I studied," said Jack. Fats was bringing a medicine chest, which looked quite imposing. Jack opened it. "The wound . . . infection. Water, please, Fats? And get a clean pot on the fire."

Fats moved with celerity and grace. The other two, Arizona and Douglas, came and stood by. They were ready to obey their leader, Buchanan now knew. He wandered around, looking at the cave dug in the side of the mountain. It was, like the maze that led to it, a tribute to the energy and imagination of the young men.

It was shelved, it was organized, it was comfortable. There were four bunks, plenty of blankets. There was more than enough of everything. Jack Wagoner had not given away too much to the poor. There was a table, a stove, several rawhide chairs scattered about. There was plenty of room. Nobody would feel cramped in this retreat, especially with the canyon outside and the high plain above. They need only be cautious and keep watch

to be safe and sound. This they had proved.

There was a larder of sorts. Buchanan found biscuits and some cold meat and some honey. He made sandwiches and strolled to the stream with a tin cup. He sat down, and watched Jack Wagoner work on the girl.

The young man loved her, of course. It was in the anxiety of his eyes, in every move he made. It must have been a great decision he had made to leave her with Buchanan.

He saw Fats Willow pick up the girl as though she was a feather pillow and walk to a special bunk to the far side of the cave. There was a screen arrangement made with rope and Navajo blankets, which lent privacy to this place. Again the bond among these young people reared in Wagoner was apparent as Fats brooded over Polly's recumbent form. Buchanan chewed the food and swallowed and drank the water and filed every move of all the occupants of the cave in the recesses of his mind.

The house at Flying W was indigenous to the country: thick adobe walls, Spanish-tile red roof, one story, spreading. Beyond the whitewashed fence that encircled it were saguaro, the tall cacti, and desert flowers noticeably in bloom. It was hot but not too hot in the patio where the men gathered, waiting.

The Widow Rose Wagoner finally appeared. Dud Davis stood one step behind her at her right side. Flanking Davis were Mal Perry and Tay Gaynor, the dark gunman and the fair-haired gunman, very polite men who spoke in whispers and wore two Colts tied low and were particular about their fingernails. They never dabbed a rope in their lives, neither did they deal cards. They were for hire, and they were faithful to their employers.

Dud Davis was different. He was of the old breed, a man who stood square on high heeled boots tooled in El Paso and under a Stetson worth a month's pay. His one old six-shooter rode high, awkwardly, in a well-worn leather holster. People spoke with respect to Dud Davis.

Pat Prince and Happy Halow were in the patio, seated, beer before them. Randy Rowe, a guard at the mines, a

middle-aged gunthrower, sat with them. At a second table sat the elegant Monte Bellario and the obsidian-eyed Sig Miller. A few other men lounged about, some with bandages on their fresh wounds.

The Widow waited until they all had turned complete attention upon her. Then she said, "You failed again. No, I don't want excuses Buchanan got the girl away safe. Jack and the boys helped there, Dud tells me. Dud knows —none of you except him and his men are worth a damn outside a saloon. Or a whorehouse."

They stirred. Out of the house came Marshal Simon Pease, moving with difficulty, clutching a chair back, finally sinking down into the chair behind the Widow. No one dared to speak.

She went on, "It's no use to go back there now. I know this game. You can go back to town, Monte, and watch over things there. Take Simon with you."

"We're deputized, we can handle the town," said Bellario.

"It don't look good," said the Widow. "You do like I tell you."

"Yes, ma'am," muttered Bellario.

She said, "Pat, take care of the mine. Don't worry too much about that payroll. I'm going to figure out something so it can't happen again. You boys go to work as usual and keep everything goin' out there."

"Yes, ma'am. We'll wait 'til we hear from you."

"You do that." She paused. "There's just one thing: we got to get that Buchanan bastard."

"We'll get him," said Bellario, showing white teeth beneath his mustache. "Sig wants him real bad."

Sig Miller's face was frozen hatred. He raised his right hand. "I swear to God."

"Whoever," she said. "If he hooks up with the boys, there will be pure hell to pay. We got a little war, we don't want a big one."

Pat Prince said, "We got a pretty big one right now."

"Big enough," she admitted. "Buchanan buttin' in the way he did. . . . You've got to get him. I don't care how. Just . . . get Buchanan!"

They nodded. Dud Davis motioned to Perry and Gaynor, who led the assemblage out of the house and toward the quarters in the rear. Dud looked at Simon Pease, then back to the Widow.

"You goin' to keep him here?"

"Like I said, send him on in. He can't ride, but he is all the law we got. Send him to town."

Dud called "Miguel!" A brown-faced, expressionless young man came from another part of the house. "Get the carriage. You will escort Marshal Pease to his office in town."

The young man bowed and departed. Pease shook himself erect and faced the foreman and the Widow.

"My daughter's still up there."

"She wasn't kidnapped or nothin'."

"She was hurt. I hurt her."

"We been over all that," said Davis.

"No matter how I try, I can't get over it. She's my daughter. It's . . . something's all wrong."

"I wouldn't worry about Polly," the Widow told him. "That gal can handle herself—if you haven't damaged her brain."

"I didn't go for to—"

"Oh, Simon, you're a goddamn fool!" she cried.

"Don't you call me that, Rose!" He swayed, trying to maintain dignity of a sort.

"A real goddamn fool. You can't control that gal any more than I can control Jack."

"So that's two of us. I won't stand for—"

She interrupted "Simon! I can't keep a drunk in the marshal's office forever. You're actin' the fool more and more every day. Now you're known to have shot your daughter. People will be askin' questions."

He stared at her. "I shot her on account of you. I do everything for you, Rose Malhearn Wagoner. For years I done everything for you."

"It's come to where you're more harm than good," she said coldly. "Now get along and sober up and leave your high talkin', smart-aleck daughter to Buchanan. If she wants to go it with him, nobody can yell rape. It'd

be her haulin' him into the blankets, big as he is."

Pease swung around to her, outraged. Then he stumbled, swayed, and caught at the back of the chair in which he had been seated. Miguel came then, with a boy at his heels. The marshal blinked at them, at the Widow, at Dud Davis. He hauled himself erect.

"Yes . . . okay . . . on the job. . . . Got a couple hard cases in the jailhouse now. . . . Yes, sir . . . yes, ma'am."

He managed to walk to where the buggy waited. Miguel had to lend him a hand, but he climbed in and sat erect, arms folded. The moon glistened for a moment on the star that adorned his vest.

Dud Davis said to the Widow, "Damn shame. He was a little bit of a man one time, enough of a man."

"Not enough," she said in a crisp voice. "Let's go inside. I have a feeling someone may be stalkin' us out there. I know it ain't true, but I got the crawls."

The house had not been altered since the death of John Wagoner. The furniture was heavy and polished, the chairs rawhide, a huge fireplace was cleansed of ash but set for a fire, logs piled neatly, shavings at hand. There was a long table, and they sat at one end as a shawled Mexican girl brought a decanter of red wine and a bottle of whiskey, goblets, and glasses.

Dud Davis had been there since long before John Wagoner died. He had been working the ranch the day young Jack was born. Power lay in him, in his repose, his steady eye, the muscular hands folded on the table's edge. He was old school, solid as oak.

He said, "Buchanan."

"Yes." She was honest with Dud.

"He's somebody," admitted Davis. "Always was."

"I made a mistake, tried to hire him," she said.

"You ain't goin' to get Jack thataway."

She poured wine, drank, then said deliberately, "I 'bout give up on that."

"The boy ain't been right since that bronch throwed him," Davis said. "Tetched, he is. Twixt the hurt and schoolin' back east, he ain't never gonna be right."

"So you'd kill him, like a mad dog or a locoed horse?"

He said, "Outa pity for the animal."

"But you haven't killed him."

"No."

"You could've laid for him, bushwacked him before now, of course."

"Certain."

"I've known it."

"Sure, you have. You're onto everything, Rose. Hell, I've been knowin' that since . . ." He hesitated.

"Since when?"

"Well . . . since the boy got hurt. Since John acted like he did, sendin' the boy east and all. Even before John took and died, I knew it. You was bidin' your time."

"But before that?"

"You was like any other ranch woman, far as anybody could see. Just a doin' and a waitin'. And nothin' much to wait for. Strawberry socials and Friday church nights wasn't for you, not never. You just set, with the boy, lettin' John have his head Never did I hear you quarrel."

"With John? As well whistle in the wind." She drank of the wine.

"He was right stubborn."

"I could've stood that." She regarded the red wine, twirling the glass "I could've stood a lot. And did. But, you know, Dad—he was dumb."

Davis knocked back his whiskey and poured another. He dwelt in the house now, he had charge of the tally book, he knew what had gone before and what was going on now. "I got to admit it, Rose. You're smarter"

"He was lucky. But I'm the smartest." She nodded. "You know it. You and Pat Prince and Simon and maybe Bellario."

"Maybe Bellario," he said. "Maybe some day we'll have to do somethin' about Bellario."

"Right" She drank and her eyes grew brighter. "You run the ranch, Dad. Nobody knows cattle like you do. I'll run the town. Pretty soon we'll have it all."

He shrugged. "All of what? This here place and what you want in town, froufrou and all that—what more?"

"I don't know," she confessed, "but I'll learn."

"I don't want no city doin's," he told her. "Gimme enough men and let me run Flyin' W, and you don't have to worry about nothin', nohow, nowhere." He paused. "Unless it has to do with Jack and with the town and all."

"I know what you want, Dud." Her voice was not soft, but it was understanding.

"I ain't caterwaulin' around like them others," he said determinedly. "You know it and I know it and that's enough."

She poured more wine. "You're my top hand, Dud. Always will be. Reckon it's all for the best you ain't like the others. Reckon I wouldn't want to see you on your knees."

"Then you'll get your druthers," he told her.

"But after settin' here all those years . . . and the boy bein' sent away . . . and now the way I got 'em by the short hair, got every damn man jack of 'em . . . I like it. I really like it." Her eyes narrowed, and the blunt hands clutched at the goblet. "You can't understand that, Dud. There's no way you nor any other man can understand it."

"You didn't get Buchanan," he said.

"No." She tipped the goblet and drank deeply. "But I ain't through with him. If you don't have to kill him I'll have another go at him."

"Buchanan ain't for sale."

"Every man's for sale. One price or another." She laughed, and the sound was unpleasant. "One way or another. They all got a price."

Dud Davis nursed his whiskey. Maybe she was right, he thought. He had his own price. He had sold out long ago, if she only knew it. His price was the ranch that he learned to love over the years—and the Widow herself. He would make the payments and hope to get the payoff sometime in the future. He was a patient man and a very tough man.

CHAPTER FIVE

ANIMAL instinct inside Buchanan's head told him it was time to awaken. It was before dawn, the fire was burning low, and the girl was on the cot. Fats Willow was watching her this trick, rubbing his eyes a bit. Arizona and Jack had gone to town, Buchanan remembered, to gather supplies and information from the *cantina* of Romano. He rolled out and shook his head and spoke to the big young man.

"Okay, I'll take over."

" 'Bout to snooze off," said Willow. "She ain't moved. You reckon she's goin' to live?"

"She'll live." Buchanan washed his face in the cold water. He pulled on his boots and ran fingers through his sandy, somewhat curly hair, and wished for a razor job. He would attend to it later, he thought.

Fats said, "Jack purely hated to leave her."

"I know," Buchanan said. He came to the side of the girl and felt her brow. His own experience was much more extensive than that of young Jack Wagoner. "Fever

ought to break any time now. She's young enough and healthy enough."

"If anything should happen to her . . . well, I dunno," said Fats. "Jack would 'bout die himself, I reckon."

Farther back in the cave Douglas groaned and turned over. The air was cool and rare, and the moon was fading but not yet giving way to the coming of the sun. Buchanan sat down next to the big fellow. "I can see that."

"We all know about it. Fact is, Doug and me, we sort of sparked around her 'till Jack come home. She's the best there is."

"Uh-huh."

"'Course Doug and me, we haven't been anywhere much. Just down to Yuma when we busted old Arizona outa the hoosegow and a trip to El Paso once in a while."

"You've got plenty of time to see the elephant."

"Elephant? I ain't lookin' for a circus. I seen a circus in El Paso."

"Just an expression," Buchanan explained. "Means you've been around, seen a heap."

Fats said, "We been tied down here. The Widow and what she done to folks. First we was too poor. Then Jack come home and started robbin' her . . . well, here we are."

"Uh-huh," said Buchanan. "You think she'll come at us with everything next time?"

Fats looked away. "I dunno. She's loco, Buchanan. She sent Arizona up. You ever seen Yuma? The prison?"

"Yes, I've seen it. A hell hole if there ever was one."

"Arizona would kill her for that. I couldn't. Doug—maybe he could. Jack says he will beat her down, and she will be all right again. Like when he was a little boy. But you know what, Buchanan?"

He nodded. "She never was a kind an lovin' lady."

"That's what they say about you. That you're smart, you catch onto things." Fats nodded. "She never was a lovin' lady, that's it. Quiet, waitin', like . . . like a . . ."

"Black Widow," suggested Buchanan.

"Right!"

Buchanan said, You'd better get some sleep, Fats. Can't tell what might be doin' tomorrow."

"Yeah." He looked again at the white-faced girl with the bandage now fresh on her head. "Hope she comes out of it. Sure do. Polly's a good one."

He lumbered off to the cot next to Doug's. He lay down, and in a moment he was snoring.

Two of a kind, Buchanan thought: kids who didn't know their own strengths, didn't know who they were, living on the edge of disaster. Arizona was somewhat jail hardened, Jack had been back in the busy East, but Fats and Doug were innocents.

The girl stirred. Buchanan sat close to her, watching. One of her hands strayed from beneath the blanket. He reached to put it back and felt pressure. Her fingers tightened. Her eyes remained closed, but the edges of her mouth smiled a bit.

"Buchanan?" Her voice was a stagy whisper.

"Uh-huh," he said softly. "Somethin' you want?"

"Did you get me there? Here? Where we are?"

"Took a few of us but you're here all right. Jack went to town for supplies," he said.

"Jack. Yes. We're in the cave."

"Uh-huh." He felt her grasp tighten.

"I don't remember . . . much. Only that I knew you'd get me away," she said, her voice growing stronger. "Hey, I'm awful hot under these blankets."

"Take it easy," he said. "You been shiverin' some, then burnin' up a lot."

"My head, it hurts."

She was silent for a moment. The color was returning to her cheeks. "My pa, he shot me."

"It was all a kind of accident," Buchanan said. "There's enough trouble without hangin' onto that notion."

"It's no more'n I could expect," she said calmly. "The Widow poisons the people, all the people."

"There's a pot on the fire," he said. "Just you hold still a minute."

He got the cloth and washed her face and her hands.

He removed one of the blankets. He propped her up and helped her arrange her hair so that it was neatly back from her face and tucked under the bandage. She moved her long legs, then relaxed.

"I'm weak as a kitten," she said.

"You will be, for a while," he told her. "Here, see if you can inhale some of this."

He handed her a bowl of soup which had been brewing heavy and fine for a couple of days. The odor was so good that he dipped himself out a cupful. He broke off a piece of biscuit, and she accepted it, soaking it in the soup.

There was the sound of horses, and Buchanan seized his rifle and went outdoors. Arizona and Jack rode in. Jack's horse was hobbling. Arizona swung down with a bulging wheat sack and took the head of both horses, and Jack came limping to the fire. He stared at Polly, then at Buchanan. "When did she come to?"

"Little while ago. Ask her." Buchanan drained his cup of soup and went to wash it.

Polly said, "I'm fine, Jack. Just fine. Buchanan was right here when I woke up."

He took her bowl and felt of her wrist, silently counting. Arizona came from the corral with the supplies and nodded to Buchanan.

"She's okay?" he whispered.

"Uh-huh."

"They almost got us again. Jack's horse caught a nick in the left hind leg. You been here all the time?"

"Where else would I be?"

"Somebody might've tipped 'em off in town. The Widow, she's out at the ranch. But Bellario and them and her old man, they seemed like they might be layin' for us."

"Then how did you get your fodder?" Buchanan indicated the sack.

"Yeah." Arizona pondered. "Well, maybe somebody saw one of us. Or somethin'."

Buchanan said, "Maybe someone was expecting you to check in just like you did."

"Could be," said Arizona.

Buchanan turned back to the girl and Jack Wagoner. He knew Arizona was suspicious by nature, but he was beginning to believe the young man was also stupid. All indications were that the forces of the Widow had been turned loose to exterminate Jack and his little bunch. In which case there would be dozens of willing tattletales in the town, eager to be on the winning side. It was a lead pipe cinch there could be no doubt about the winner, once all forces were concentrated on the job.

Jack was saying, "I wish I'd been here when you come out of it, darling."

"Buchanan was here," she said, smiling sweetly. "It was just like wakin' up from a bad dream and feelin' that you're safe after all."

"How about your head?"

"It hurts," she said.

Jack asked, "How much soup did she take?"

"Bowl about full," said Buchanan. "I'd say she's out of it, needs to get some strength, is all. Keep the wound clean, take it easy for a while."

"That's what I say," Jack agreed. "Can you sleep some more, Polly?"

Her eyes were heavy. "Reckon so. Seems like I can sleep all . . . the . . . time. . . ."

The stars were twinkling and the air was cool and good. The horses were quiet in the corral, small animal things and insects moved in the recesses of the canyon.

Jack said, "You don't have to stay here. I thank you from the bottom of my heart for bringing Polly in. But there's no real sense in staying, is there?"

Buchanana said, "Nope."

"You know she's going to turn them loose?"

"Your ma? I wouldn't want to predict anything that lady might do."

Jack said, "She's at the ranch. That's where she goes when she has a big decision to make. I know."

"I believe you."

"She can t stand not having her way. I do think she hates me because I'm . . . crippled, Buchanan. I do

believe that. It's tied in with my father somehow or other. She hated him."

"She sure was quiet about it when I knew her, ten years or more ago."

"Yes. She was waiting. Like a spider in its web."

Buchanan said gently, "You know you can't win."

"That's why I suggested you leave."

"You'd keep Polly here?"

Jack was silent. Then he said, "She'll be able to travel in a few days. Mother will take that long to come to her decision. You could take Polly with you."

"Take her where?"

"You'd find a place for her," Jack said shrewdly. "You can do those things People know you and respect you."

Buchanan said, "She's got a father. They'd law me if I took her away."

The youth said slowly, "I figure to kill her father."

"You do what?!"

"They'll come after us. If we don't do something about it really quick, they'll bottle up the canyon and try to starve us out. We'd go over the mountains, and they'd chase us. I would then kill as many of them as possible. Simon, the marshal, would be among the first."

"I see," said Buchanan. "That's the way you figure."

"It's the only way."

Buchanan said, "No."

"You'd have us clear out, escape without a fight?"

"If necessary," Buchanan said.

"Never!"

"What good will it do to kill a few of 'em? Your ma will hire others. Nobody'll be any better off. Whatever you've done until now won't mean a thing."

Jack said, "There's no other possible way I could accept. The boys agree. We have to try to fight them."

"In a rigged game where you can't win?"

"Maybe we can scare them. Maybe we can—"

Buchanan interrupted him. "Forget it. She can kill all of you –if she wants to. That is, if you stay here and let her call the turns."

"This is our place."

"It was. I found it. Others will when the time comes. You got to get out of here."

"No. It's safe enough here."

"There's a little herd of wild horses up yonder," Buchanan said. "Maybe twenty, thirty."

"I've seen them. What of it?"

"You're running low on mounts," Buchanan said. There's a stallion up there, a beauty."

"I know."

"I was you, I'd take the boys up there. I'd round up that herd for a start."

"Are you crazy, Buchanan? I mean, why should we be doing anything like that at a time like this?"

Buchanan said, "First let me tell you I couldn't leave. I see a bad situation here. I see where you ain't exactly one hundred percent right, but you got points. I see that. No way I can run out on it."

"So?"

"So, you're the boss. You give the orders. Just think about it. You bring your cavvy, bring Polly. You get a head start. We cover track in case somebody does come snoopin'. They think you're in Costello's Canyon—but you ain't. Advantage for you, ain't it?"

"The horses, the mustangs. What about them?"

"We'll talk about that later. One thing at a time," Buchanan said. "I ain't about to make a suggestion to your boys in there. I'm just taggin' along. But you let me know in the morning."

After a moment, Jack said, "Polly trusts you all the way."

Buchanan did not miss the resentment in the tone of the youth. He said, "But you and the boys don't."

"You brought her in," said Jack reluctantly.

"No thanks to you." Buchanan stepped back, surveyed Jack in the light of the stars and the small fire. "I'm gettin' a wee bit tired of this. You all sittin' up here makin' the world safe for the poor folks and all that. People gettin' killed because you and your mama can't get together."

"Now, just a damn minute!" said Jack. "No one asked your opinion."

From the cave emerged the huge figure of Fats Willow. He rubbed sleep from his eyes and said, "What's goin' on here? Jack, you need me?"

"I don't need anyone," Jack said. Arizona and Douglas appeared now, shapes in the background. "I know why I'm here. I know what I aim to accomplish."

"Uh-huh. Glad to hear it," said Buchanan. "You people want to fight me? Or do you want to grubstake me and let me go up on the high plain while you think things over?"

Arizona said, "Fight you? That's too easy. I say let him go, Jack."

"Yeah, let him go. He won't go to the Widow," Fats said.

"I know where he'll go." Jack twisted his enormous wide shoulders, standing on his good leg, tall and angry. "All right. Take what food you need for a couple of days."

"You'd better think hard," Buchanan said. He went to where the food was stored. He put what he needed into his saddlebag. He took one more look at the girl, saw that she was sleeping comfortably, the fever broken. He went to the corral, ignoring the young men now grouped around Jack, their eyes following him. He saddled Nightshade. He led the horse out of the corral, mounted, and headed up the mountain, not looking for trail, zigzagging where necessary, allowing the horse its head.

Fats asked, "What's his beef, Jack?"

"Nothing. Just—well, he's not one of us now, is he?" Jack went to where Polly lay inert and sat beside her, shutting off conversation. The others returned to their bunks, slowly, silently, thoughtfully. The atomsphere in the hideout was thick with suspense. Jack sat with his head sunk like a turtle's, staring at the girl, thinking about Buchanan's advice.

At dawn Buchanan was up eating a cold breakfast. The water hole he had seen from afar was clean, but there were more muddy tracks than he had expected.

The mustangs must have gathered together because of the sound of gunfire below them, he thought. Stallions were known to unite their bands when trouble impended, separating when peace again ensued.

He thought of Jack Wagoner as he swallowed hard tack and jerky and washed it down with the cold water. The word *horses* was the key. If he heeded Buchanan's warning and came up here, it would be largely due to the fact that the mustangs were here and he needed a new mount. Nothing, not his accident, not his sojourn in the East, had caused him to defect from his first love—the horse.

Buchanan's task was to locate the herd, study them, guess as to their habits and condition, and be prepared. He saddled Nightshade once more and rode for a promontory he remembered from the past.

His old field glasses came into play from that high spot. He sat for hours as the sun rose, watching the water hole. While Nightshade grazed scornfully on the scant furze, the day came into full being.

Then he saw them. There were, as he had surmised, two stallion leaders. One was gray. The other was a roan. There were at least thirty mares and colts and young horses in the band.

The water hole was at the end of a wide plain. All around it was rock. At the other end of the flat place there was a sheer wall. It was a natural setting for Buchanan's purpose, but he needed help, lots of help. There was also a matter over which he had no control —timing. He devoutly wished he knew what was going on in the minds of the Wagoners, mother and son.

He watched the horses. The gray was the bigger of the two stallion leaders. The roan was prettier, a fine . . . looking animal. Neither was as big as Nightshade, but their conformation was excellent. When they moved they were all fire and grace, holding the herd together, sending them away from the water hole, loggy but satisfied and ready to eat. The two stallions remained apart, on either side of the bunch, maintaining a truce, Bu-

chanan knew, that would last only so long as they wanted . . . or needed it.

They were a beautiful sight, running free, their manes tossed in the breeze of their own making, the colts frolicking, the mares rubbing noses, showing themselves off for the stallions. He watched them until noon, then mounted the black, and rode to a place at the farthest end of the plain. He could watch from here and stay downwind of the herd for a little while. He even dared to make a small and smokeless fire among the tumbled rock. He heated coffee and made some bacon in his small pan. It tasted as good as anything he had eaten since Polly's Place—which seemed a year ago.

He wondered how the girl was this noon and had the notion that she would be up and about. She was a strong one, the kind the country needed It was too bad she wasn't in love with Jack Wagoner.

But she was not. Buchanan knew it and possibly Jack was beginning to believe it. The handsome youth had refused to listen to her, and the girl was as sturdy in the head as in her body. There was a hard time coming for young Jack, and Buchanan's sympathy went out to him. He was wrong in a lot of ways, but his heart was good. He took after both father and mother, Buchanan recognized. He had his dad's good heart and his ma's relentless stubbornness.

He finished his meal, sanded the tinware, drank from the canteen. He surveyed this edge of the plain. This was where the rock formations were wildest, where horses would be least likely to frequent. It might have its uses if things went well. Again he thought that it all depended upon the timing.

Now came the worst part, the waiting. He was a man who wanted to make things happen upon his own part. This was not an adventure of his choosing, it had a bad odor about it. The waiting would make it smell even worse.

Rose Mulhearn Wagoner surveyed herself in the full-length mirror she had imported from San Francisco. The

blouse fitted her tightly, the neck open v-shaped, the waist tucked into the divided skirt. She tilted a hat, black to match the other garmets, slightly to one side of her head. Her hair was piled up to fit beneath the hat She wore soft black boots tight at the ankles.

Her face was pale, but maybe that was caused by contrast with the black costume. She sipped from a glass of red wine. She could hear the men arriving at the ranch. She had sent them into town; now she was calling them back, and they came like little lambs at her bidding. She drained the glass.

She wrapped the black belt around her middle. She had caused it to be custom-made in El Paso, where so much of the leather trade was carried on. The holster bore a short-barreled .32 S & W. The cartridges shone brassy, relieving the dead black. She took a red scarf from a drawer and tied it loosely around her neck to add another bit of color.

She had, she supposed, become vain. She did not care a hoot about what people thought, but she was determined always to look her best. She wanted no man to touch her but craved their admiring stares. She reached for the carafe to pour more wine, then stopped. It was a day when she must be cold sober.

She had not slept well. All night she had thought about Jack and his father and the way things were. Time and again she had sought courses to gain her point without further battle. She had found no way.

Now they were gathering, and it was fitting that she wear black. There would be dead men in the hills today, and among them might well be her headstrong, reckless son. She hoped she could save him; she was going on the raid in order to save him. But in the night she had found the resolution to face the fact that he might be killed and killed by men hired by her.

It was a matter of fate, she told herself. It was the way her late husband had begun it and the way her son had carried it on. They defied her, they belittled her. She was always wrong in their eyes.

Today she would end it. She would have the final

word no matter the cost. If Buchanan was still there, she would have him killed, or at least captured and jailed. The same went for Polly Pease. There simply was not room for the two brands of thought.

Afterwards she would have Pat Prince distribute food, as Jack had done. There would be clothing for the destitute. The people would not make a fuss if they felt they would be better off than before.

Then she would cut the wages to pay for the largess she distributed. There were always more ways than one to skin a cat, she had told Dud Davis, and he had made a face because he hated the cats, the ones that prowled on his beloved herds.

She went into the big room now and they were waiting, drinking whiskey—Pat Prince, Bellario and his men, Simon Pease nearly sober. Dud had his two gunners armed to the eyebrows, lounging—quiet men ignoring the townsfolk. Happy Halow was grinning as usual, and the muscle man and shooter from the mines, Randy Rowe, made eyes at the Widow as she faced them. Rowe fancied himself a ladies' man and Pat Prince was ready to kill him about half the time. She regarded them all, smiling, then sobering.

"This is a hard thing for me to do," she told them. "I am sending you after my own son, my flesh and blood. He has caused all of us too much trouble. He has caused deaths among you. Now he must pay."

No one spoke. They were still not certain as to their orders. Dud Davis stroked his mustache, moving his spurred boots on the tiled floor.

She went on. "I do not want my son killed. But I got to tell you that if it happens I won't blame anybody. It's one of those things that might happen. The same goes for the man Buchanan. And Simon, what can I say about your daughter who is with 'em?"

Pease said, "Anybody shoots Polly has to answer to me."

"Nobody's goin' to shoot at her," the Widow said. "But she's with 'em. She might get in the way. Nothin', and I mean absolutely nothin', is goin' to stop us now!"

Dud Davis said, "We got to find 'em first. We know they're in Costello's Canyon some place. If the dogs can't root 'em out maybe Snake can."

"You got Snake out there?" asked Prince. "Old Snake?"

"I got old Snake and his son," said Dud Davis. "Them Apaches know the mountains better'n anybody."

"If we're ready," said the Widow.

"We're ready," said Davis. "Got your hoss saddled. Better get goin' whilst there's daylight."

She went outside and Davis gave her a footup, and she sat astride a fine small chestnut that had been broken for her with the greatest of care. The animal did not have much bottom, but it looked fine and could make it to the canyon. She was nervous about riding and vastly preferred driving, but to get to Costello's she had to sit in a saddle. It was a diversion, in a way, keeping her mind from the deed she had ordered and was attempting.

The hounds ran with Bud Hawkins, a slab-sided hunter who worked around the ranch. Davis gave the orders and they started off, long ears swaying, loping in the dust. Hawkins rode a mule, and the dogs were attuned to it and to their silent, scrubby master.

The others strung out, the ranch people always in the van, the townsmen trailing, some of them more ill at ease on horseback than the Widow. Everyone had a rifle, and most carried sidearms. There were hangers-on from the saloon and the mine that the Widow did not know by name. They all touched their hats as she went by and fell in behind as the caravan made its way into the mountains.

Polly asked, "Where's Buchanan?"

"Take this," urged Jack Wagoner, proffering a cup steaming with hot liquid.

"Buchanan!" she demanded. She arose, soaked with the sweat of her fever and weakened by the convulsions of the chills. She stood, shoving him aside, taking a step, staggering, then leaning against the wall, pushing back her long hair, and staring around at them. "You let

him get away. You . . . you saddle bums! You fools! You dummies!"

"He went away," said Jack. "He went up on the mountain, to the high plain where we saw the mustangs."

"He said we better git outa here," Fats added.

"You shouldn't be trying to walk around," Jack said to the girl.

"I can walk around. I can ride, too. You catch me up a horse, one of you." She touched the bandage on her head.

"You ought to be in bed—"

"And let your ma come and get at me? Or my own pa shoot me again?" She laughed. "Catch me a horse, I tell you. I'm goin' up there and find Buchanan."

"What can he do that we-all can't do?" demanded Fats.

"Ask your big leader, there. Just ask him. If any of you was one-tenth the man Buchanan is I wouldn't be headin' for him now, would I?"

Arizona came out of the depths of the cave. "Now, just a damn minute, you gal."

Unexpectedly, Doug added, "Yeah. Just who do you think you're talkin' at?"

She stood straight and tall. "I'm talkin' about you. Big robbers. Nobody shootin' at you for real, so you're high and mighty. The Widow's got people could shoot out your left eye from a mile off. And she'll be up here now. I know her mind."

"You don't know nothin'. No woman knows nothin'," said Douglas.

Jack Wagoner looked from one to the other of them. He had lost his influence for that time. Fats Willow crouched a little, as though someone was coming at him with raised fists. Polly laughed in a cracked voice.

"That's what you believe. Okay, let me tell you. The Widow's been crossed once too often. She'll be up here with all her bunch. And like last time—she'll have 'em shootin' to kill. Even you, Jack."

He said, "Yes. I guess I believe that." His handsome face was ashen white. "I guess we've been sort of play-

ing a game stealing from the rich, giving to the poor. As Buchanan said."

"You sure have," she agreed. "Now will you catch me up a horse, or do I have to go and do it my own self?"

Jack said, "I think she's right. I think we all better get our gear together and go up the mountain. Maybe Buchanan's wiser, maybe not. But it's true that they can find us if they've got the dogs and enough oldtimers that know the canyon. It's true, all right. Let's *vamos*."

Fats looked surprised, then relaxed. "I'm game, pardner. You and Polly, you can't both be wrong. And Buchanan, too."

Relief showed on Jack's face. "I think it's wise. If they don't come up here—we can always return. Should we start packing?"

He reached for his saddle bags. From inside the cave there was a familiar clicking sound. Fats whirled around. Polly laughed again on the rash note. Jack faced the pair, Arizona and Douglas. Each had a cocked rifle in his hands.

Arizona said, "You ain't the only one been doin' some thinkin'. Me and Doug, here we laid awake some."

"Are you puttin' guns on us?" demanded Fats, disbelieving? "You, that we sprung outa jail? You, that we took in when you was stark alone and hungry, you Doug?"

Arizona said, "One thing I learned in that stinkin' hell hole at Yuma: never let go of anything you got. That saddlebag, now. Reckon a part of our share's in it."

"Half is what your share is!" cried Fats. "Give it to 'em, Jack. We don't need turncoats like them."

"All of it is ours, friends," said Arizona. "We didn't give away the biggest part to the poor folks. You did that."

Polly said, "Give it to 'em. They won't live to spend it. Give it to 'em Jack."

"You gal, you're loco. Bad enough you're a woman, you also got a hit in the head," Arizona said. "Them people ain't comin' up here into our guns. Not no how. Even the Widow wouldn't be able to make 'em try it." He looked at Jack, then at Fats. His voice became conciliatory. "You been good pardners. Hate to see you de-

part like this. Why don't you tell that gal she's ravin' outa her mind?"

Jack said, "No." He tossed the saddlebags to the ground. "You won't mind if we take our gear and some water and food?"

"Heck, no," said Arizona. "And your guns. We ain't mad atcha. We know you mean good. It's just that you ain't thinkin' so good since Buchanan came around and the gal there, our Polly, began to think the sun set in him."

Fats Willow said, "You sure about this, Jack? You sure you want to leave 'em with the money and all?"

"What you goin' to do about it, friend?" Arizona asked genially.

"You wouldn't shoot us. And if you did, I'd get to you and eat you alive."

Arizona said, "Maybe you would and maybe you wouldn't eat us alive. But you'd die of indigestion, Fats. No . . . that's another thing I learned in the jailhouse: when you got the advantage, keep it. Hang onto it."

"It's no use," Jack said. "Let's get started. Sun'll be high in another hour or two."

Fats said, "These two . . . I don't like it."

Polly said, "If we're right—they'll be dead men before another day goes by. If we're wrong—best thing we can do is get out of here and stay out!"

"The job's not done," Jack muttered. But he limped out to the corral and took his reata from a fence pole. Fats began gathering the blankets, and Polly parceled food and water, faltering at first, then finding balance and enough strength to go on. She knew Jack and Fats were covertly watching her. She set her jaw hard and kept going.

Jack and Fats came with the grulla, a sorrel, a chestnut, and a small pack mule. They loaded their blankets and food and spare soogans for Polly. She went to the sorrel pony, managing to swagger a little and to laugh, "Redheads together, right? Looks like he'll take me up there."

Arizona said, "You got three good ones. You'll need 'em on the mountain." He was entirely without rancor,

as though their departure was by their own desire. Doug on the other hand, said nothing, standing dour, watching, the rifle still in his hands. "I sure wish yawl good luck," Arizona went on. "Soon as it cools off here we'll knock off one more big payroll and get out of here our own selves. Only we want a bigger stake. Don't be too mad at us, will you?"

Jack said, "I'm not angry with you."

"Fats?" asked Arizona.

"Naw, the hell with you," Fats said, and put his horse to the side of the mountain.

Polly didn't wait to be questioned. "No use to be mad at you. Like I told you before, if you don't get out of here you won't be alive in a day or so. There's too many of them for you. The Widow's lost her patience. Best you should come with us."

"You was always a right peart gal. Too bad you've gone loco," Arizona said, laughing. "So long, yawl."

"*Adiós,*" said Polly. The trio rode off from the cave.

CHAPTER SIX

IT was Nightshade who drew the attention of the big gray stallion. The black horse had been downwind of the wild herd all day and was highly indignant that Buchanan should detain him from joining all those lovely little mares. He was more than willing to do battle with either the gray or the roan for them. Nightshade had never been of the peaceable disposition that distinguished his owner.

The downwind had changed so suddenly that Buchanan did not have time to alter his position. So, when the gray charged, he had to hold Nightshade back for fear of damage to both animals. He rode the black mercilessly to the other end of the plain.

There the roan and his bunch whinnied and cavorted and ran pell-mell away. Buchanan held his breath for fear they would go over the edge and down the mountainside to their destruction. He had known wild stallions to lead their bunch to death rather than submit to captivity. He reined in at the farthest possible spot from them, watching as the gray and the roan, however grudgingly,

masterfully marshaled their forces and stood at the water hole.

The trick was to keep them from the water and to make them move. He had his plans made if and when help arrived. Nightshade was skittery, but long habit made him obey against his great desires. Nightshade, Buchanan had observed, was superior in many ways to a lot of people both had known.

Jack Wagoner, he thought, was a romantic. The Widow was a full-blown, cynical egoist. Never the twain shall meet, he concluded.

The girl was a jewel among stones of no worth. Arizona, Fats, Douglas were unknown quantities.

The entire situation was up for grabs. Probably the best thing he could do at this time would be to trap one of the stallions, run his mares and colts down the mountain on the other side, and break them, then sell them. In that way the journey to Wagoner would not be a total loss.

But he waited. It was in his character to play out every hand until the final card was flipped. He headed the wild horse away from the water hole and waited.

At long last he saw the three tiny figures laboring up the mountain trail. He put the field glasses on them, recognized them. He waved his hat and went to the edge of the plain to greet them, keeping one eye on the mustangs.

They came up with Jack and Fats on either side of the girl. The sun had mounted high, and she was exhausted, reeling in the saddle. She stared at Buchanan, and there was no trace of the fever in her.

"Thank God you're all right," she said. She rode up onto the flat and slid from the horse and sat on the ground and put her face in her hands. The wrinkled, unclean dress rode up to her pretty knees. Once again Buchanan noted the graceful long line of her shapely legs as he hastened to her with his canteen of cold water. She drank a few swallows, then smiled gracefully.

"We brought water. And food."

"Plenty of water here." Buchanan hunkered down,

tilted his hat to one side. "You're missin' a couple of men, ain't you?"

"They'll remain among the missing," said Jack.

"Uh-huh," said Buchanan. "That's the way it goes in this here life. As you get older you'll learn that most people think about themselves first. And at that, they guess wrong most of the times."

"They kept all the loot," said Fats. "The dirty rats."

"Good thing," Polly said with vigor. "Now they won't find any of it on us."

"They? Which they?" Buchanan asked.

"Oh, they'll be comin' up the canyon," Polly said with vehemence. "You know it and I know it. She'll be after all of us. Maybe if it was just Jack and them. . . . But she can't stand you and me bein' in on it."

"I'd say she's right," Buchanan said to Jack. "I'd say the fun's over."

"She convinced me," Jack agreed. He was scanning the horizon. "Is that a gray and a roan out there?"

"Yep. Ever see two bands get together like that?"

"No. I've seen each of them at separate times and places," Jack said. His eyes glowed. "You've been keeping them away from the water?"

"Uh-huh. Figure when they do drink they'll get logy."

Fats said, "Hey! I see how you kept 'em millin' and too busy to go down thataway. And they got the cliff over yonder at the water hole. But how'd you stop 'em from goin' up the road over the mountain, there?"

"Got lucky," said Buchanan. "There were some loose rocks yonder. Pushed 'em down to the road."

"You shoved them rocks down to that road?" Fats opened his eyes round and wide. "Hey, they weigh tons. I know them rocks. Thought about blockin' that road if we had to skedaddle right quick."

"Well, I had a little experience with boulders," said Buchanan. "With just a bit more leverage I could've done like you say—blocked the road."

"But you thought we might be using it," finished Jack. "You believed we'd come along with you."

"If you used your brains," Buchanan told him bluntly.

"Polly knew. Figured you to be as smart as she is."

"It's still not proven," said Jack. "Mother changes her mind often."

"She'll be after us," Polly said. She was on her feet again, bedraggled but indomitable.

"Maybe," Jack muttered. He could not refrain from gazing at the herd of mustangs. "I would give a lot to have time to cut out the gray and the roan."

"You ain't got a lot," Fats reminded him. "Arizona and Doug, they got it."

"They won't have it long," Polly insisted. "If we're goin' to run those mustangs we better start now. I doubt we'll ever finish the job."

"We've got a choice," Buchanan said. "Roll back the rocks and run the herd over the mountain if we can. Sell 'em down country for you a stake. That sets the three of you loose."

"What about you?" asked the girl.

"Never you worry about me," he told her. "I always have a grubstake, either on me—or waitin' for me."

"Then I say let's go with Buchanan," she said. "I never want to see Wagoner again."

"Me neither," said Fats.

But Jack sat his horse and stared back down the mountain trail as though he could see Costello's Canyon, the tumbled stone and trees and brush and all that was between him and the Flying W and the mine and the town. He sat for a long moment in a silence that grew. Buchanan felt every sympathy for him—he had been born and raised here; his heritage was here.

Polly asked, "How about it, Jack?"

He looked at her, managed a smile. "Well, you never know who your father may be, they say. But you always know your mother. Right? Wrong. I don't know her. I do know this: I can't leave her with everything under her control. I can't run away. I have to stay."

Polly said to Buchanan, "No use arguin' with him. That's the way he is."

Buchanan sighed. "Uh-huh. Not a bad way to be,

neither. Now what do want to do? Try to dab onto those stallion?"

Jack shook his head. "You don't have to stay. None of you. Why should you?"

"I don't know about these two," Buchanan said. "Me, I sorta bought in. I'm stuck with it."

"But why?"

"I knew your daddy," Buchanan said. "I see what's goin' on down there. I don't like it no more'n you do. I think your ma may be a bit teched, and I don' admire the company she keeps. That's reason enough for me."

Polly cried, "Buchanan, don't be as crazy as they are? You can't beat the Widow! She's got the whole country on her side. The laws, everything are on her side."

"Comes a time to see if a law stands up," Buchanan said. "Comes a time when what some say is the law turns out to be wrong. Get us a judge and a square jury down there, and maybe things'd change."

"That's what I've been saying," Jack chimed in eagerly.

"Uh-huh. But you been stealin'," Buchanan said. "That don't quite get it."

"It's the only way we knew to get at her," Fats Willow said. "It ain't easy, buckin' the Widow."

Buchanan said, "Hush!"

They all froze in position. Echoes bounced around the rocks of the mountain and the high plains. Buchanan's trained ear had picked it up first.

There was the sound of guns down below. "Too many for a huntin' party. Unless they're huntin your partners," Buchanan said.

"They've come into the canyon," said Jack.

"They've done better'n that. They found the cave," said Fats.

Buchanan said, "Then it's too late."

"Yes,'" said Jack. "It's too late. They wouldn't listen."

"And the Widow'll get back all the loot," said Fats. "Arizona and Doug'll go to jail. And if we don't get outa here fast, we'll be next."

"No," said Jack. He stared at Buchanan. "I can't go up that trail."

"You said that before," Buchanan reminded him. He drew a hand across the sandy stubble on his jaw. "The mustangs. Best round them up."

"What good will that do?"

"You didn't cover trail, did you?"

"Why, no."

"Dud Davis and the dogs'll be right along," said Buchanan, "soon as they miss yawl and know you've come this way. They won't stop with Arizona and Douglas, not now."

"Nor the loot?"

"Nor the loot. Once a mob gets started, they keep goin'. I doubt the Widow could stop them if she wanted."

Polly said, "She don't want to." She went to the pack horse. "I brought some ammunition—44s and 45s. It'll fit all your guns." She plucked a short-barreled shotgun from the pack. "Never thought it'd be me. I believed Buchanan had the sense to go over the mountain."

"Never did have a lick of sense," said he. "I'm a peaceable man, too. But there comes a time when they push. Never could abide bein' pushed."

Jack asked, "The mustangs? Are you serious?"

"Never was one for foolin' around in a situation like this. They got a lot of people down there and a plenty of guns. It won't take 'em long to get up here."

He uncoiled a long whip. He rode around the band of mustangs. The whip had a snapper on the end that sounded like the explosion of a pistol. It made the wild horses crazy with rage. Jack and Fats and the girl spread out in a fan shape, and they all moved in behind the wild bunch, running them ahead under their control.

Once the dogs had found the cave, it had not taken too much time—only the kangaroo trail. The Widow looked at the two bodies hanging from the low, spreading trees and said, "Cut them down."

"But . . the example," said Dud.

"They'll know. Their faces . . . like they are, all black. Buchanan will know. Cut them down."

They put Arizona and Doug in the cave under blankets, but the toes of their boots showed. The dogs were baying.

Dud said, "Snake says there's tracks of one man made some time ago. There's fresh tracks of two. I would reckon Jack, Buchanan, and the gal are tryin' to get over the mountain."

"Over . . . running away, you mean?"

"Not far. Buchanan, he knows every damn body. Like at the state capital. He knows politicians by the carload."

"You mean he might go up there and make a fuss?"

"And bring militia," said Dud. "And we got two dead men here to explain."

"Money from our payrolls," she said. "We found it on them."

"Maybe you can prove that. And maybe you can't."

"We got our own dead and wounded."

"Sure. But the law looks at things funny, sometimes. You know that, Rose. And there's Jack and the gal to back up Buchanan."

"What do you say, Dud? What?"

"I say you take that Bellario and his people back to town. They ain't any good up here nohow. Let me handle this."

"You'll have to kill Jack."

"Hell, you think I want to? I knowed him since he was a button, didn't I?"

"You'll have to wipe them out to keep them shut up," she said. "You know, deep down I always thought Jack'd quit and come in."

"Arizona and Doug showed you they won't quit, Rose. You got to believe. As for Buchanan—I don't need to warn you about him."

"Yes," she said. "Wipe 'em out, Dud. You're the only one I can trust. Take the men you need and do it."

"You better be startin' right now."

"Yes." She sighed. "I'll tell the others. It's . . . it's a hard thing to do, Dud. I'm sorry."

"Don't be sorry."

"I'll tell them. Like I say, you take those you're sure of."

"Yes, ma'am."

She lingered. "Jack's done wrong."

"We killed his pals here. Hung 'em for stealin'. You can't save him, Rose."

"I know. Be careful, Dad." She turned away. She saw him gather up Perry and Gaynor, then Hawkins and the dogs. Old Snake and his slant-eyed, mean-looking son stood by, happy to be in on the kill of any whites, secretly hating them all. She went into the cave. The two bodies were side by side, and she walked absently around them. They no longer meant anything to her.

They had made a home in the cave, she saw. Everything was very neat. When he was a Little boy, Jack had been annoyingly neat, even like his father. Happy-go-lucky John Wagoner—but he was a neat man.

She shrugged away thoughts of the father. She had never wanted the baby, that was the whole of it. John had forced it on her. She knew always that he had whores in Tucson, in Yuma, in Santa Fe, anywhere he chose to go on business of any kind. It wasn't long after they were married that both had found out it was all wrong.

There was nothing she could think to do about it at that time. Certainly she had wished John Wagoner dead. She had known his excesses would kill him sooner or later, and she had hoped and prayed it would be sooner. And it had happened after Jack had been hurt and went away. She had been able to do her work alone, without even the interference of a yammering kid. It had been a good time.

She had thought about it so much that she was prepared when it happened. She had nosed through accounts at the ranch, at the mine. She had daydreamed herself into the position she had immediately assumed. She had even known how she would attire herself when the time came. And she had never doubted that the time

would come. She had believed in her destiny, that she would rule men.

Chin up, she strode toward the mouth of the cave. She stumbled. She put out a hand, found no support. She fell.

She had tripped over the scuffed, protruding boots of Arizona Jones. The blanket, disarranged, showed his young face, blank, eyes staring at the ceiling. He needed a haircut and a shave.

She scrambled away on all fours. She got to her knees. She was remembering Arizona, the carefree, reckless young cowboy who worked for John at the Flying W. He had been a lighthearted kid when John hired him. Before he went bad . . . went bad and had to be punished . . . by the Widow of Flying W.

She shied away from the corpse. She got to her feet. She inhaled the crisp mountain air, seeking balance. She forced down the tumult that seemed to be building in her. She could see Bellario and the others talking, smoking, lounging, unaffected by death, awaiting her. She would lead them back to town and give them orders. They would obey her. All would be as she had made it in her world.

They did all but come to attention when they saw her. Pat Prince and Halow and Randy Howe from the mines, Bellario and Hiller from the saloon . . . Dom Litteri would be waiting in the saloon for their return. She had Kantor at the hotel, and there would be the usual hangers-on drinking free beer. And there were miners in town, enough force in case of attack. She paused.

Attack from whom? Dud Davis and his men would easily dispose of Buchanan. And the others. She had enough witnesses to convince any jury handpicked from around Wagoner that Jack and the Willow boy and Polly were guilty of one thing and another. There would be no attack.

She went to the pony and allowed Bellario to give her a hand up. He began caressing her ankle, very surreptitiously. She kicked him—using her sharp heel—and smiled and waved a hand, as she had once seen a

cavalry captain do, and led the men down the road to Wagoner.

The clouds still raced across the sky. There were high winds above the plains, but the sun shone brightly. The mustang herd was now circling, badgered by the four riders. They had nuzzled their fill of water and were not so clever nor ambitious as before. This would pass in a few minutes, Buchanan knew, adjusting the old field glasses, looking down the trail.

It was a wide enough path leading from Costello's Canyon to the plain. It had been worn in by the Indians, then the seekers of gold had traversed it back and forth for years. It was steep but not too steep; it could be accomplished by a horseman at a walk—but no more than a horse's walk.

Jack and Fats were riding the flanks, Polly was on the drag, on odd sight with one of Buchanan's kerchiefs wrapped around her mouth and throat, the dirty bandage on her skull, dress hiked up to show those beautiful legs, exhorting the sorrel, waving a rope. Buchanan cracked his whip and the mustangs changed their course, running for the high barrier of the cliff.

They were smart in some ways, but their sense of direction was easily confused by sudden sounds or movements, Buchanan had learned years ago in other places. They could be maneuvered if one was very careful. An old mustanger had once told him, "Thing is, you gotta be smarter than a hoss. Some people never do come to it."

Jack rode up and paused to give his horse a blow. "No sign of them yet?"

"Not any. There's no other way unless they go all the way around and come back over the mountain, is there?"

"No. And they'd spend a week at that. They wouldn't have provisions for a week."

"Just what I thought." Buchanan took out a sandwich he had made earlier and gnawed on it. "You reckon your ma will be with 'em?"

"I don't know." Jack drank from his canteen. "I don't know how much stamina she has."

"Stamina," Buchanan repeated. "Meanin' guts."

"Well, yes. Guts. If they killed Arizona and Doug, how much more can she take?"

"Plenty," said Buchanan. "Mountain climbin' ain't what she's good at, maybe. But she can take plenty."

Jack said, "Sometimes you sound as though you admire her . . . almost."

"Almost, that's right. Lady like her, quiet all those years when you was little. Must've been buildin' up a mighty head of steam, you know."

Jack shook his head. "I've thought of that. I know how my father was, always a good time with the boys. All that. But she has gone too far. As though she is mad. No one can talk with her, reason with her."

"Uh-huh. Tried it myself. People won't listen, nothin' will ever get done right," Buchanan said. He stared down the trail. "No one comin' at us as yet."

"But you know they'll be here." Without waiting for an answer he turned his horse and went to help the others keep the mustangs milling.

Fats Willow reined up. "You don't happen to have another sandwich, do you, Buchanan? My stomach thinks me throat's cut."

"Uh-huh." He produced bread and meat, mashed together. "You got it all straight what we're doing now, have you?"

"I got that. What I don't got is how it'll work." He chewed off half the sandwich.

"It had better work."

"That's what Jack says. Polly, she knows it'll work because you say so."

"Polly's under a big strain, her head wound and all. You take it easy on Polly."

"Oh, sure. I always did. She's a great gal," said Fats. "But she ain't under half the strain Jack is. He's steamin'. Polly's bein' real mean to him."

"I sure feel sorry for him. Soon as this is over I'll be headin' out of here. Then maybe everything will be

different for him," said Buchanan. "If we're lucky it will."

Fats said confidentially, "Tell you what, Buchanan. We been lucky all long. Like to get ourselves killed a dozen times. Arizona, he's reckless and Jack, he thinks because he's doin' good for folks that nothin can hurt him. Me, I'm scared. I'm with Jack 'til hell freezes over. He's the best man I ever knew. But . . . I'm scared."

Buchanan drank from his canteen. "Son, there's people down there with dogs and guns and horses. They don't like us any. They're surefire comin' up here to shoot at us. What I mean is, if you ain't scared you're plain dumb."

Fats swallowed the last of the sandwich. "Are you scared?"

"Is Texas the biggest state in the union?"

Fats grinned. "Now that makes me feel a hell of a lot better."

Buchanan handed him the field glasses. "Keep a look on that trail for a while. When they show let out a whoop."

"And a holler," said Fats.

Buchanan rode around the herd, snapping his cracker-whip. The girl's face was streaked with sweat, and her eyes were bright. There was no sign of blood upon her bandage. She wiped with the kerchief and asked, "Am I doin' all right, Buchanan?"

"Just perfect," he told her.

"I'm admirin' that roan," she said. "Jack's all for the big gray but the roan suits me."

"He might be yours some day."

"Wouldn't know what to do with him." She shrugged. "After this is over I won't be hereabouts. Dead or alive, I'll be elsewhere."

"You may have something there. Wagoner ain't big enough for you."

"It could've been," she said. "It didn't work out. The Widow—and my old man, the way he is—and everything."

"Jack?"

" I thought he was some punkins, I really did. Then I began to see his head was screwed on wrong."

"Not altogether, I wouldn't say."

"His mother's son," she said.

"Now that's plumb ridiculous."

"Is it? You think about it, Buchanan. Just study on it. You'll see."

"Now, Polly, you got to. . . ." He never finished.

Fats Willow howled, "Here they come! Dogs a runnin', people killin' their hosses!"

Buchanan cracked the whip. Jack Wagoner waved his hat and rode around the milling mustangs. Fats spurred away from the trail leading downward. Soon all four of them were lined up, and the mustangs were racing to what seemed to them to be—at long last—an open door to freedom.

Buchanan said, "Let nature take its course and things generally work out. Everybody ready?"

"Ready," said Jack. "Polly, you stay in the rear now, you hear me?"

She was taking out the shotgun and loading it with two shells of double buckshot. "You boys mosey along. I'll be somewheres along the way."

Buchanan said, "Well, here goes nothin'." He snapped the whip once more, then put it in his open saddlebag. He was wearing his six-gun, and his rifle was in the boot. Jack Wagoner and Fats Willow were similarly armed.

The gray led the mustangs to the road. The roan acted in unison, steering the colts so that they did not plunge to the rocks below the plain. The herd gathered speed. An avalanche of loose stones flew around them, before them, as they charged down the hill. Buchanan and the boys yelled at them, increasing their speed.

The people coming up the road were, of necessity, not moving not more than a fast walk. Those in the van saw the wild herd approaching and tried to turn off. There was only broken ground, steep and dangerous. The mustangs plunged straight ahead.

Buchanan saw a rifle glint from among those who had succeeded in getting out of the way of the horses. He

fired the rifle, and someone screamed in pain.

Men and mounts went down. The mustangs surged through them and over them. There was a tangle of saddles and bridles and man and beast. Fats Willow fired into it. Polly was behind Buchanan. Jack seemed to be looking for targets, as was Buchanan, but Fats emptied his rifle, thrust it into the scabbard, and drew his revolver. There were the cries of man and beast in the thin mountain air.

Buchanan, and Polly with him, slowed down, peering, seeking a semblance of order in the chaos. Dud Davis rose from behind a rock, and Buchanan fired at him. The foreman of the Flying W spun around, and Fats shot him again. He fell. The dogs were caterwauling and running, tails between their legs, with Hawkins after them. Hawkins fell and the horses ran over him.

Perry and Gaynor, the gunslingers, had pulled aside among the first. Buchanan now saw them out of the corner of his eye. They were looking for a target, and he imagined it was either Jack or himself.

He called, "This way, gents. Come get it."

They spun their guns into action. He felt the lead fly past him. He shot Perry in the head, knocking him backwards. Then Gaynor slumped, and Buchanan could see Jack Wagoner riding him down, firing again at him.

The rest of them panicked. They tried to turn their horses around to flee. Some succeeded, others slipped and went down. Buchanan and the girl went past them. Fats Willow was still shooting, cleaning up as they rode. Jack stayed behind now, as a rear guard. The dogs had broken for home, their cries diminishing in the background.

One group had made a stand. Buchanan recognized the big mine foreman, Pat Prince, and Happy Halow. With them was Randy Rowe, the other gunman.

Buchanan called, "Better give up, boys."

Randy Rowe raised his rifle. Buchanan fired at once, and Rowe dropped the gun, clutching at his shoulder. Fats wheeled and rode toward them, but Prince lifted his hands.

Happy Halow yelled, "I had enough of this!"

Prince said, "You got us, Buchanan. You and them damn kids."

"Toss down your guns," said Buchanan. "Then get out there and help with the wounded. Move!"

They obeyed with alacrity. Jack Wagoner was already going among those strewn about, using his medical knowledge as best he could. Polly and Fats followed him.

Jack looked at Buchanan. "Dud Davis is dead."

"I'm plumb sorry," said Buchanan. "It's never easy to kill a man, any man."

"I've known him all my life,'" Jack said. "Buchanan, maybe I've been wrong all along the way."

Hap Halow peered up from the corpse of one of the gunners. He said, "Jack, he come up here to kill. Dud was the one that said it hada be done."

"Shut up, you!" yelled Pat Prince. "It was a fight, that's all. A fight is a fight, people get kilt."

"I warned you when Buchanan came to town," Halow said. "I told you and her and everybody."

"You're a damned fool," said Prince. Then he was silent. They caught up horses, and he obediently helped to wrap the bodies and tie them onto the backs of the steeds.

Buchanan said, "Take them to town. Take them to the Widow. Show her that Davis is dead."

"You're goin' to let us go to town?" Prince stared his amazement.

"There's some wounded here. Take 'em in. We don't want them to die on our time," Buchanan said. "Tell the Widow we'll be in to see her . . . when the moon is right."

Happy Halow said, "You crazy Buchanan?"

"If I was totally sane I wouldn't be here," Buchanan told him.

They watched. Neither Jack nor Fats protested when the unsightly caravan passed down the hill and out of view. Polly sat on the sorrel, waiting for word from Buchanan.

"Time to go down to the cave," he said. "The mustangs

will be in the canyon. And—well, we all know what must have happened."

"Yes," said Jack. "We know."

They rode without haste, each with deep thoughts, none without sorrow.

The Widow sat behind her desk in the office above the saloon. Simon Pease, comparatively sober, sat across from her. She drank the red wine, then said, "Buchanan."

"I knowed Dud over ten years," Simon Pease said. "I reckon I know how you feel."

"He was a good man. He was a top hand. Even John put lots of store by Dud."

"Never was a better hand with cattle," said Simon. "Buchanan."

"They said he called the turn. They said he called it on all three of 'em," Simon said. "Prince even admitted it after Halow said it."

"Why not? He's a damn gunner," she spat out, again reaching for the wine. She was hissing like an angry cat. "Dud Davis was my right arm. Buchanan cut it off."

"I don't think we should've hung Arizona and Doug. That'll make 'em twice as mad. I know they were shot to hell anyway, but hangin' 'em, that wasn't smart."

"It was legal. They killed and robbed, they had a trial right there in the cave," she said. "We found the money on 'em."

"Legal? Okay, Rose. If you say so."

"It'll be legal when we kill Buchanan, too."

"You got a son. I got a daughter. They are with Buchanan."

She said, "Which makes them guilty as sin."

He was silent, staring at her. There was no pity in her. She was in black, as always, and to him she suddenly looked like a hanging judge, implacable, ugly. He had been in love with her for years, long before John Wagoner died, and now she seemed a stranger, cold and hard and extremely dangerous. He got up from the chair.

"I need a drink."

"Have you sworn in everyone?"

"Every man that can walk and tote a piece of hardware," he answered. "The whole damn town is deputized."

"I want him dead. I want his body hanged higher than those two thieves," she intoned. "I want to see it."

He did not again mention Polly and Jack. It was no use, now, he realized. He did not remind her that downstairs there were Bellario and his henchmen, who were talking together in whispers. It would do no good to warn her that Happy Halow seemed unenthusiastic about going against Buchanan and that there were Mexicans who had laughed when being sworn in as deputies, who would, if they had weapons, turn upon those who opposed their beloved Señor Jack and tear them apart. She had removed herself from reason. She was into the red wine, and no one knew better than Simon Pease what that could do to an otherwise sane person.

He went down into the saloon. It would be better for him to take the same route as the Widow for now. He could not allow himself to think of Polly and Jack being shot down by the gunmen of Bellario or the miners under Pat Prince. He was unable to do anything about it, he knew—but he didn't want to think of it.

In the canyon they were burying the dead. There were a couple mustangs to be shot, also. Fats and Buchanan did most of the hard work. Polly and Jack managed the lesser chores, both of them still in shock over the hanging of the bleeding bodies of Arizona and Doug

Buchanan said to Fats, apart from the other two, "It was done as a warning, you know. It means you should go in and give yourselves up."

"And be hanged alive," said Fats. "No, thanks. I got to believe they were dead or near to it when the rope was put around their necks."

Buchanan said, "It was a nasty thing. We'll need time."

"Time before goin' to town, you mean? Leastways I hope that's what you mean."

Buchanan said, "They won't come up here again."

Fats threw up a shovelful of dirt. "I'm with you."

There were two bodies wrapped in tattered blankets

yet to be buried, men unknown to Buchanan. He watched as the shovel handled by Fats struck something hard and ungiving. It was not rock; they had chosen a place where they could dig along a deposit of comparatively soft silt.

Fats said, "Hey, looka this."

He turned the edge of the spade, and an object wrapped in decaying leather came to view. Buchanan jumped down into the ditch.

"Why, that there is a miner's pan." He bent and with care uncovered a smaller artifact. "And this is his spoon."

"Spoon?" Fats leaned on his shovel, curious.

"They usually initial them. Particular about their spoons. Made from a cow's horn or an antler, somethin' like that." He lifted the curved horn to the light. He whistled. "A. C. Wasn't Costello's first name Alphonso?"

"Seems like," said Fats. "You mean we found old Costello's junk?"

"Diggin's," said Buchanan. "I be damn. Costello's Digs. This was the body of the crick. Up there where the stream runs now, where the mustangs are waterin', that would be where the body of the stream changed. You see?"

Fats said, "That was what Doug was always pokin' around, tryin' to find. I'm no miner."

"The gold is here," Buchanan said. "It's somewheres in this riverbed. The crick was diverted by a change in the terrain. Landslide, earthquake, anything that would force it out of its course. We got to take a look at this."

"You mean I got to dig another grave for them two?"

"It might be worth a fortune to you," Buchanan told him.

"Who, me?" Fats leaned on the shovel. "Hey, Buchanan, can't be. Jack, maybe he was meant to be rich. Me, I been poor, I expect to die poor."

"You haven't been around cryin' about it," said Buchanan. "Reckon your luck might've changed."

"If so . . . where you want me to bury these jaspers?"

Buchanan paced paced off a distance, indicated a spot. "I'll get another shovel. And while you're diggin' you

remember that if there is such a thing as bad luck—there has simply got also to be good luck."

They finally finished the grisly job. Buchanan helped put the last shovels of dirt upon the mounds, removed his hat.

"Lord, I don't know any verse. I don't know what to say about these men who came to bad end. But I reckon You've got mercy for all and I commend them to Your care."

Fats said, "Amen." They went back to the relics of the miner.

The pan was about eighteen inches across the top, fifteen inches across the bottom. The horn was well-worn. Buchanan rooted around in decaying leather until he came across the small vial that completed the kit. He went to the trench where the stream had died, dropped into it. As he had expected, water was seeping gradually into it.

Buchanan knelt and inserted the horn, drawing sand onto its concave surface. He brought it up to eye level and eyed the dull gleam He pinched at the sand. He rolled this between finger and thumb. Then he replaced it in the horn, cast it back and forth, peering closely. He saw color at once. He was not expert enough to determine its value offhand, but he knew it was gold. He extracted it and placed it in the vial. He repeated the procedure until the vial was filled, then capped it with a rolled bit of the leather.

He looked up from his task and saw Jack Wagoner watching from above. He handed over the vial.

"Funny thing," Buchanan said. "You down there stealin' from your ma, and all the time there was gold here for the takin'."

"Costello's Digs?" Jack was unbelieving. "You found the gold?"

"Let's say Fats really found it. Diggin' a grave. There always seems to be a grave diggin' goes with it. The price of gold."

Jack said, "But . . . but nobody thought of the stream changin' its course. And they were always looking for a

shaft or for nuggets strewn around. I've heard talk since I can remember."

Buchanan said. "Another old sayin': 'Gold is where you find it.' Seems like the old saw always come home to roost. Thing to do now is register claims."

"The assay office," said Wagoner.

"That's right."

"There's one in Tuscon."

"There's one in Wagoner," Buchanan reminded him.

"There'll be more killing before we ever get to register a claim there."

"Claims," said Buchanan. "One for Polly. One for you. One for Fats."

"And one for you."

"No," he said, "I won't be here to take care of all that has to do with it."

"Register it," said Jack. "You can't believe we won't take care of it for you?"

Buchanan thought a moment. Then he said, "It looks like I'm takin' pay. In all my life I never hired to fight. I'm a peaceable man. I want to stay that way."

"Who said anything about the fight? What you did for Polly . . . Oh, hell, Buchanan, what you did for all of us is a lot more than fighting. I wish we could go into town and make some sort of peace."

"We could try," said Buchanan.

"There'll be more killing," Jack repeated. "She won't have it any other way."

Buchanan said, "The way I see it, if the killin' begins it won't be on our heads. Sooner or later it's got to be settled, between what you want and what your ma wants."

"I know you're right."

Buchanan said, "Now's the time to get it straight."

"Arizona . . . Doug . . . Dud . . . the hired guns. Who's next?"

Buchanan said, "That's somethin' I don't ever let myself think on. You do what's right and nobody can do any more'n that."

"Can I think awhile? And I'd like to explain to Fats. He listens to me, understands me. Just an hour or so?"

Buchanan looked at him, remembering him as a wide-eyed small boy. There had been a heap of pain and trouble since then, and now Jack Wagoner was again vulnerable. The arrogant confidence was gone from him. He was no longer sure of his crusade against the Black Widow.

"Why, sure, son. Talk it over with Polly, too."

"Well . . . later." He was gone, limping to where Fats filled in the double grave, taking up the extra shovel.

Buchanan turned. Polly was waiting. She had been unable to mend the dress and had found a pair of Levi's that she managed to trim down to her slim waist with scissors and heavy thread. She wore a shirt that had belonged to one of the dead men, caught tight around her by other artifices. A kerchief covered the wound and the hacked hair.

She said, "I heard."

"Uh-huh." Buchanan said.

"You knew I was listenin'?"

"Man gets so he knows when people are sneakin' up and hidin' behind bushes," he told her.

"I'm glad he went to Fats," she said. "They . . . you can see. They're closer than I ever was to any of 'em Fats means everything to him"

"You mean that's the way you want it," Buchanan said. "You mean that you won't let Jack get close to you"

"Maybe," she said. "Maybe it just wasn't meant to be."

"Uh-huh. What do you think?"

"I think we should go to town. It's our town as well as hers, or Bellario's or Pat's or Happy's . . . or Pa's town. Sooner or later, just like you said."

"It's up to Jack. We could send to Tucson and register the claims while a couple of us watched here."

"It ain't the way to do it," she said.

"That's the way I figure."

"Jack'll come to it," she declared. "I know that much about him. He plumb baffles me sometimes, but I know that."

"The Widow won't give in easy," he warned her.

She reached out a long arm and her hand, roughened

by work in the restaurant kitchen, touched him. "We could be rich, you said."

"You listened longer'n I thought. You're some Indian."

"I have to know."

He said, "You could get rich if it pans out like it looks. I'm no expert, but I'd say it's high grade."

"Okay. So I can go away and learn to talk right and learn how to dress and all. Not like the Widow. Like ladies I seen in the *Godey* magazine. I could read books. And go to the theayter like I also read about. In the *Godey* magazine. I could maybe take a ship and sail some place."

"Uh-huh. You could do all that."

"And you think the Widow's goin' to stop me? Or any of the men that go heelin' like curs at her shoes?"

He looked at her, hearing the echo of her earnestness, seeing the light in her eyes that illuminated her face. She was not plain that moment. She was beautiful.

"I reckon they won't," he said. But it was another worry to carry in him, that the light should go out of her.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THERE was a gibbous moon, and they awaited the return of Jack Wagoner. Fats Willow was down the trail at the spot where it met the main path into Costello's Canyon. Polly and Buchanan were still at the cave.

Buchanan said, "The mustangs have never gone back to the high place. That's because we do not disturb them."

"They will go soon enough."

"Yes," he said. "I will see to that."

"They saved us. But you drove them, it was your idea."

"And killed a few. But I'd like to save the rest of 'em."

"Jack would like to have the gray."

"Uh-huh. I hope he gets it."

She said, "It's takin' him a long while."

"Uh-huh. That's the way it is, sometimes."

"Don't you ever get fretted?" she asked impatiently. "You just set there and look at the moon and never stir. I swan, Buchanan, sometimes you make me nervous."

"Made a lot of ladies nervous in my time," he admitted. "Never did claim to be a ladies' man. Jack'll be here soon enough. Romano never failed yet."

"It'll be daylight pretty soon. You know they got people in the hills, watchin' for us to come out."

"It'll all be taken care of in due time." Of this he was far from certain, but the girl, on the threshold of hoped-for independence, needed reassurance now.

"Buchanan?"

"Uh-huh."

"When I go . . . leave here, I can go anyplace?"

"Like I say."

"Will you show me where to go and what to do?'"

"Why . . . uh . . . sure enough."

"San Francisco. Is that the best place to start?"

"Well, they got a school for gals."

"I'll go there."

"Okay. But what about Jack? Be real sure."

"I'm sure." She stretched, smiling. He could see the sweep of her strong young body. "You promised."

"I know. I promised."

They heard the sound of horse and rider and went out of the cave. It had been a refuge and a place of death, and beyond it lay riches for the taking, but the two felt they might never see it again. She took his hand and held it tight as they went to meet Fats Willow and Jack.

The two dismounted and hunkered down. Jack did the talking.

"There are scouts on the road. They heard me, even though I took the back ways. They know something. They'll be watching."

"Let me worry about them," Buchanan said. "The town?"

"She's got it stirred up. Romano says she walks the streets at night. She keeps people around her day and night. She never goes to the ranch. Bellario seems to be taking more upon himself. Simon stays drunk. . . . Sorry, Polly."

"He always did," she said.

"Pat Prince stays in town with Halow and Rowe a lot of the time. Manuel is running the ranch. On the surface, things seem about the same. But Romano says trouble runs deep. He knows we're going in."

"Of course," said Buchanan. "Be careful with Nightshade, he don't like to be led. But Polly's been workin' with him. He trusts her."

"I guess it's time to start," said Jack. He peered at the girl. "You ready?"

"I'm ready."

"Then let's go."

Buchanan rode to the mouth of Costello's Canyon. Then he dismounted. He gave the rein to Polly, felt the warm but nervous pressure of her long, strong fingers. He left the others without further words. All had been discussed, all plans made. He walked down the trail without his rifle, but with his six-shooter holstered and a long knife in his boot.

He had been through all this area before, with Fats, with Jack. They had walked or rode all the paths, all the twisty ways that others did not know about. Among them they had detected all the tricks used by the scouts.

There were Apaches out there and some Mexicans, all very good. Buchanan knew them by their habits, if not by name. He knew their ways, and he had his own methods. He had been a plainsman, a mountain man, a river man. There was no trick he had not attempted at one time or another.

Now he went straight across the mountain on the trail for a good mile. Then he dropped off into a small ravine. He took some time getting through this place. When he came out at the other end, there were two of them, sitting on rocks, watching.

But they were watching the other way. They were guarding the trail that he had so promptly deserted. He could have gone by them and on into town without disturbing them, but there were Polly and Fats and Jack to come, and someone had to clear at least part of the way.

He came in on his belly, using his elbows. There were rocks which might clatter, and he avoided them with the skill of a big snake. When he was close enough he rose to his feet and spread his big arms.

He caught each of them by the scruff of the neck. He banged their heads together so that they made a clanking

noise, and for a moment he feared he had killed them both. He lay them side by side and listened to them breathing and was relieved.

He used rope that he had wound around his waist and their own belts and kerchiefs to bind and gag them. Then he took their boots. When he had turned their horses loose they would be safe enough in the hills in their socks—even if they found a way to get loose . . . which he doubted since he had learned to tie knots from a sailor he had met on the Barbary Coast of San Francisco.

He moved downhill. He sniffed and there certainly was smoke on the air. He knew that long vigils made men sleepy, weary and bored, and of these the worst was boredom. He followed his nose to the fire.

There were three of them in tasseled sombreros and sarapes. The fires was not for heat but to give a bit of light to a game of cards they were playing atop a flat rock. They sat crosslegged, smoking hand-rolled brown cigarettes, slapping the age-thickened cards down hard, making guttural sounds at each play. They were utterly engrossed.

Buchanan located their horses and cut them loose. He slapped them hard with the flat of his knife blade and sent them clattering. Then he vaulted onto the big rock with his six-gun in his other hand and said in Spanish, "Pardon me, gentlemen. I must ask you to prostrate yourselves. Face down, if you please."

He made a quick job of treating them as he had the others at the head of the road. He had no need to check his watch to note the passage of time. He was ahead of schedule, and that was the way he wanted it. He had given the youngsters all kinds of reasons, most of them false, in order to gain a start upon them. He wanted to be in Wagoner before them. He did not exactly know why. He did not really know what he could do alone in that town where they wanted more than anything else to see him dead.

He just knew he wanted to be there before Jack Wagoner. The youth had suffered enough, had lost enough. Robbing payrolls and rustling cattle had done nothing to ennoble him in his own eyes. It had brought him

to fatal battle, and he did not enjoy the flight nor its aftermath. He was no joyous warrior, exulting in bloodshed. He was a kindly young man with a dream of justice for all in his head and unrequited love in his heart.

He came upon the last of the outposts, two men half asleep. One tried to pull a gun, and Buchanan hit him in the belly, whereupon he lost all interest in the proceedings. The other gave in without a struggle, indeed with some symptoms of relief, and said, "This here's a dumb stunt, The Widow ain't thinkin' straight. She oughta wait 'til you drift on, y' know what I mean? The kid can't keep it up forever, not if she gives the word to shoot him."

"And she gave the word," Buchanan said.

"Yeah. But they know you're with him."

It was a responsibility to be acknowledged, Buchanan realized. From it there was no escape; he must go forward. He listened for sound on the back trail and heard none. They were remaining behind as he had ordered.

He came to the edge of town as dawn broke. He went straight to the rear door of the *cantina* and Romano came, rubbing sleep from his eyes.

"They are all here. Prince and his men, the Widow and her Bellario, and the gunmen and the drunken marshal. They are all with her, upstairs or downstairs. They remain with her. It is as if she fears that Jack will come."

"And Jack's friends, your people?"

"They are ready but not well-armed. They will die for him. He has given them hope."

"It ain't enough." Buchanan debated. He needed a shave, and he was hungry from walking. When he was hungry his mind worked well, but nothing else seemed bright and shining. He asked tentatively, "You know the assayer?"

"Señor Wakely? But of course."

"Is he honest?"

"Not truly. He is a man with a tongue loose on both ends. He is scared of the Widow, of course."

Buchanan took out the pages upon which they had made their claims, each signed by the claimant. "Supposin' I took these over and filed 'em. Would he talk?"

Romano blinked. "Costello's Digs? You have found the digs?"

"Will this Wakely spread the word?"

"If you bid him be secret, he will spread it."

"Could you get the news around?"

"But of course." Romano was puzzled. "Is this not an insanity?"

"Maybe. But I reckon nobody'd jump our claims. Not if things work out the way they should around here."

Romano thought a moment. "The town, it will be deserted."

"Mighty nigh."

"Ah, yes. Only those who stand by the Widow will remain, not so?"

"So," said Buchanan.

"I will take you to the house of Wakely. He has a fat wife and sleeps late."

"Just tell me where it is," said Buchanan. "You remain here until Jack and the others come in. Hide them here until you hear from me. Understood?"

"Understood." Romano eyed him. "You wish to prevent the killing, is it not?"

"Just tryin' to figure a way out," Buchanan said. He listened to directions to the house of Wakely. It did not really matter about the claims. They could be filed later once the intent was declared. He would see to that. What he wanted was action in the town; those unarmed people—and some of the Widow's adherents, too—leaving in search of gold. He well knew the power of gold, of the mere mention of the precious metal.

She waited upstairs. It was almost noon, and she knew there was something wrong. Long years of being attuned to the mine, the ranch, and the town had made her supersensitive. There were people missing from the saloon, customers who were daily present to pay court.

There had been no reports from the scouting parties guarding the roads from the mountain canyon. She was going to send someone out to check on them. She drank red wine and stared at the familiar outlines of the furnishings of her office with eyes that did not see.

She had long preferred to be alone. Her mind worked better when there wasn't anyone to distract her. Now she suddenly needed someone. Dud Davis . . . but Dud was dead.

She had depended more upon Dud than she had ever realized. She knew it now, feeling the loneliness. Pat Prince was a clod, Happy Halow a clown, Bellario was only trustworthy so long as she watched him, as Dud had watched him and frightened him. Bellario, she thought, was as brave as his men, Sig Miller and Dom Litteri, allowed him to be. Without them, she thought, he would be harmless. With them, he was dangerous—to her as well as to anyone else.

Simon Pease came up the outside stairway. He was wobbly but able to navigate. She let him in and he sat down in the chair, as was his custom.

She asked, "Where is everybody?"

"Gone to the canyon," he said. His voice was husky but not blurred.

"Costello's Canyon? Whatever for?"

"Gold."

She stared at him. "Gold?"

"Buchanan put it out that they found the digs," said Simon Pease. "Filed claims for 'em all. Polly too."

"It's a lie. People have looked for Costello's Digs for years and years."

"But not Buchanan. He's some kinda crazy galoot. Wakely says he wasn't even excited, just as calm as anything. Wakely says he woke him up, Buchanan did, that is. Calm as could be. But nobody else is calm."

"So that's it. A gold rush. I remember when John opened the Wildcat . . ." She broke off.

"We was young, then," said Simon Pease. "Polly was a baby. Lost her ma right then with the consumption. Oh, I remember it good."

"I don't want to hear about it."

"I started takin' a nip, then. What I mean, I took too many nips."

"I know all that," she said. "I'm thinkin' what a damn fool Jack was. The gold was there all the time. He could've given it away to his heart's content."

"Polly's gonna hate me for shootin' her," Simon went on, oblivious. "For you, like always."

She glared at him. "I got no time for that slop. Buchanan's in town."

"I know."

"How many deputies you got left?"

"I don't know. They ran for the canyon like the devil was after 'em."

"Get as many as you can. Take booze to 'em. Money. Anything. Gather them downstairs and watch for Buchanan. He won't have any last word over me."

"I know. You want him dead."

"You bet I do."

"And Jack. You want him dead."

"He'll kill if we don't get him first. He is beggin' to get it."

"And Polly?"

"Damn it, she's with them, ain't she? Did I ask her to run with them? She's in on it."

"You want 'em all killed?"

"It's them or us. You, me, all of us. What makes Polly any better than us?"

"Like I say, Buchanan filed a claim for her. She could go away . . ." He touched the star on his vest, fingered the clasp, then stopped. "Maybe she ain't with 'em. Maybe she stayed up in the canyon."

"You go and do like I say." She reached for the bottle of red wine. He hesitated one more moment. Then he could not meet her eyes. She turned away and in a moment heard him clomp his way down the outside stairway.

She sat and stared into the depths of the wine. She had always hated John Wagoner, she believed now. Even before the baby she had hated him.

What difference did it make if she had borne a boy baby? It was all John's fault. If the boy had behaved when he returned from the East where the father had sent him to be corrupted . . .

But he had come back with those crazy ideas. They were not western ideas. He wanted to interfere with all she had built. It had taken a lot out of her to accomplish it all.

She drank the wine.

She had the power. She would not give it up. No man could long stand against her. Few had tried. She either destroyed them or bound them to her.

The rest of them could die. She had seen death in the canyon, and it had not scared her, not really. She could face it.

Arizona's boots had been worn. It was pathetic to see any old worn shoe, for some reason. She always bought new ones before her slippers were the least bit worn....

Buchanan watched them go out of town, laden with what picks, pans, shovels, axes they could find. When he called to Romano, that worthy was also gone. None could resist the lure of gold.

Any minute the three young people would be riding in. There was a shed behind Roman's *cantina* that Jack had used before. Buchanan debated, then shrugged, and went out the rear door and across the back lots of the town in the direction of the saloon.

For a man his size it was not easy to find shelter as he went on his way. He paused beside a particularly ill-smelling outhouse behind the stable, then darted to where a spreading oak tree gave him time to regain his breath. He was not certain as to his procedure. He only knew that he had tried to keep young Jack Wagoner apart from his mother until it could all be settled, until she could, by one means or another, be brought to reason.

He felt that in this place on this day Jack's life would not be worth a plugged nickel if he were to be seen first by the Widow or her minions. If there was a way to prevent this he hoped he could find it. He made another darting move and came behind the saloon without having been seen.

There were sentinels. Every time he changed position he discovered one of them. But they were mainly townsmen, and Buchanan was of the outdoors, and it made the difference. He surveyed the man guarding the rear door of the saloon, and, with a small start, he recognized him. It was Marshal Simon Pease, who would be expected

to maintain a far better position than guardian of the back of the place.

Pease took a pint bottle from his pocket and tipped it Buchanan came from behind the tree and waited at the back of the marshal until he had swallowed. Then he spoke quietly in Pease's ear.

"Easy does it."

The marshal said, "Buchanan?"

"Uh-huh."

"Polly? How's Polly?"

"Okay."

"She . . . she'll never speak to me again, will she?"

"I reckon she'll have a few words to say."

"I don't care. I deserve 'em. Long as she speaks to me. Did you really find the digs, Buchanan?"

"Uh huh. Now how about answering a couple questions for me?" He took Pease's gun and shoved into his belt. "Where's everybody, and what are they cookin' for me?"

"They got rifles all over. Didn't you see 'em?"

"Yeah. But they didn't see me. Now, about the saloon?"

"Bellario, Sig Miller, Litteri, the barkeep. Pat and Halow and Randy Rowe. And some riffraff with guns. Not many. Everybody took off for the digs."

"The Widow?"

"Up in her office." He hesitated, shook his head. "For years I done everything she said. Even now, I couldn't raise a finger agin her. But . . . she's wrong. She wants you all wiped out. Polly . . . she don't give a damn if Polly gets it along with you."

"Polly will be along. You might wander down to Romano's shed. She might be there," Buchanan said. "Don't go for another gun, though, Simon. I'd take that personal."

"I won't," promised the marshal. As he went around the corner of the building he was again tipping the bottle. He did not forget to take the back way that Buchanan had just traversed.

The protection of the tree seemed proper for this time. Buchanan examined the gun he had taken from Pease. It was slightly dirty. He broke it, thinking he

m.ght need a second weapon since they had rifles after him. The Widow was smart; she knew the long guns were more certain. He drew the end of his kerchief through the barrel of Pease's revolver. In doing so, he moved half step from behind the trunk of the big tree.

"Got you, Buchanan, you devil!" It was the voice of the Widow.

The next thing he heard was the sound of the gun. The bullet was in his left shoulder. He went down and rolled over and over. It hurt through the shock of the wound, but he kept on rolling as bullets peppered the earth in the trail he made in tall grass. He got out his own revolver and fired blindly.

The Widow screamed for all to hear, "Buchanan's trying to kill me! Get him! Arrest that man! He's trying to murder me."

They came boiling out of the back door of the saloon. Buchanan found himself in a drainage ditch someone had begun and not quite finished. He could not rest any weight on his left elbow. He managed to flatten out, discarding his hat. He held his Colt steady on the edge of the ditch.

He dropped one man. He saw Bellario dodging and that Sig Miller was coming right on, blood in his eye. Miller was remembering his earlier humiliation. Buchanan fired at him, hit him high. Miller went over backwards under the force of the .45 slug.

The others scattered. Pat Prince was bawling orders. "There's plenty time! Surround the bastard!"

The Widow keened, "He's in the ditch . . . in the drain. . . ."

Then she was oddly silent.

Buchanan managed to get to his knees. They had rifles, all right. He would have to make a dash for the tree, then for the saloon. He didn't believe there were any of them left indoors. He needed shelter.

And he needed help. He had never needed it more. He had failed to have his talk with the Widow before being discovered. There was no way he could now arrange a truce between the woman and her son. It came down to a fight. It always did. He was a peaceable man who always wound up in a fight for his life. Right now blood

was running down inside his shirt, very warm and clammy, and his left arm would not work for him.

His intentions had been of the best: to prevent more bloodshed. It had been a good plan, but it had not worked. He made a dash for the tree, a bit unsteady, looking up to see if the Widow was waiting to take another shot at him. There was no sign of her, and he thought bitterly that she had come down to be in on the finish—his finish.

He leaned against the tree. A rifle bullet came too close. He drew a deep breath and broke for the saloon door. He took giant strides, his left arm hanging loose, the revolver in his right spitting at vague targets, most of which were out of range. He hit the door and went through.

Litteri, the bartender, was waiting, a grin on his swarthy features. He had a sawed-off shotgun in his hands. Buchanan had seen men cut in half by such a weapon.

Litteri had a finger on the trigger. Buchanan dropped to the floor. The charge went flying over his head. He pulled the Colt up and shot Litteri through the head.

There was a commotion at the front door of the saloon. Buchanan rolled again, found a chair, managed to get his bulk upon it, and rested his gun on the edge. He had expended three bullets There were only two more in the revolver, and he could not reload. There was nothing left to do but sell his life as dearly as possible.

Two women came reeling into the saloon. The Widow was hanging onto her rifle with both hands. Polly was managing to render the gun useless with one hand. The other was firmly fixed in the Widow's hair. They went around and around while Buchanan stared, almost forgetting to watch the doors.

Bellario peeked in, then drew back quick as a snake's head. There was a flurry of gunfire in the street. Fats Willow howled, "Buchanan, where are you?"

"In the bar!" Buchanan roared. His head was beginning to go around a bit. No matter how many gunshot wounds a man suffered, they always managed to make him dizzy, he thought in disgust.

Polly was beating on the Widow, now. She had the

advantage in height. She kicked and the Widow lost her grip on the rifle.

Buchanan said, "Over here, darlin'."

Polly tossed him the gun. Then she went back to work. The Widow had a beer glass and was trying to gouge her with its broken edge. Polly knocked it away and landed on the Widow's eye with a roundhouse right. The Widow flew over the bar and fell behind it. Polly went on over and after her.

Fats Willow came in, his gun pointing out through the doors. Jack came in the back way, lingering. Both had rifles. Buchanan sighed in relief.

Jack demanded, "Why did you come here alone? Where's Mother?"

Buchanan said, "I thought I might reason with her a little. I believe she's somewhere yonder."

Behind the bar Polly arose. She had the Widow by the hair again. She dragged her out and dropped her on the floor. The Widow was conscious but gasping.

Polly said, "I think she's ready to call off her dogs."

"What? What have you—"

Polly said, "She shot Buchanan. You better take a look at him, Jack. She shot him in the back just before I got to her. I could've killed her, but Buchanan didn't want any more killin'. Which is why he came alone, you dummy."

Fats fired through the front door. "If she wants to stop it, she better hurry. Because there's a few Mexican people out there ready to start a war."

The Widow leaned against the bar. Her hair looked like the fright wig worn by end men in the minstrel shows, Buchanan thought. There was a swelling which would be a black eye. Her clothing was so torn and disarrayed that she tried to hold it together, staring around as in a nightmare.

"Jack . . . Polly . . . Buchanan . . . Fats . . . Where is everybody?"

"We're all here," Buchanan told her. "If you want to stop all this damn foolishment, go outside and call off your people. Otherwise—you might not live out the day."

She said, "I . . . wait!" She staggered behind the bar and turned on a cold water tap. She ducked under it. She came up with a big-toothed comb, dragging it through her hair. She found a pin to use on the front of her dress. She took one more look around and asked, "You'll quit? I mean, you'll not kill me?"

Buchanan said, "Nobody'll get killed if you say the word."

She had aged twenty years in the past half hour, he thought. The light had gone from her. Polly had taken some of it from her. Failure to kill Buchanan might have helped, he thought grimly.

She walked past Fats Willow onto the veranda of the saloon. She called loudly, "It's all over. Put down your guns. Simon, where are you?"

"Right here." He was across the street in the doorway to his official office.

"Tell 'em to stop. I don't want any more shootin'. Jack . . . Jack's here. So is Buchanan. And Polly."

Simon Pease said, "Okay, Rose. Just like you say, Rose."

She came back into the saloon, looked dully down at the body of Litteri, touched the greener with the toe of her slipper. "He wasn't much. He nor his boss."

Jack was attending to Buchanan's shoulder. The Widow watched. Suddenly she sat down on one of the chairs across the table. Her head went slowly down, onto her arms. The Widow wept.

Buchanan said, "I've ridden hundreds of miles, seems like with bandages here and there on me."

"You shouldn't do it," Jack said.

"Get yourself the gray and the roan," Buchanan said. "They'll be up on the high plain by now."

"I'll do that," said Jack.

"I'll be going."

"How's your ma today?"

Jack shook his head. "She's still in shock. I don't think she'll ever be herself again."

Polly Pease said, "I hope not!"

"I mean physically," Jack said. "She's—broken, really.

She just sits and looks into space. The only thing that seems to give her pleasure is a glass of wine with Simon."

Buchanan said, "She wanted it all. She near had it, too. Then you came home and couldn't make her understand that enough is plenty."

Polly said, "Then you came along and settled her bacon. And got a bullet from her for your pains."

Jack did not look at her. He spoke to Buchanan. "It's all arranged. I'll have your claims worked by our mine people. I'm sending cash in advance to your bank in San Francisco for Polly to use when you get there."

"It's a small world," said Buchanan, knowing that it wasn't all that small.

They said their final farewells and rode out. Polly was on the sorrel. She wore Levi's and a shirt that fit her very well. They soon left the town behind.

She said, "It don't even seem like I'm leavin' home. This Wagoner place held nothin' but hard times, a drunk papa, and an achin' heart for me."

He said, "You'll be okay. We'll get the train at Tucson."

"Train? I never been on a train. I'm scared of trains!"

"It's a long ride to San Francisco," he said.

"That's just fine." She smiled sweetly. "You can teach me a heap, you know. I don't want to be plumb ignorant when I get there."

"You're not plumb ignorant."

"Yes I am, too." Her smile widened. "You and me, we're goin' to enjoy this ride. Hell's fire, why do you think I insisted on comin' along with you, instead of goin' by myself?"

"I didn't think. I see it now," he told her. His shoulder hurt, and he needed a rest, a nice peaceful rest. He doubted that it was forthcoming. She was a plain, rusty-haired girl. What with her Levi's and long legs she somewhat resembled a boy riding a sorrel horse.

But when you looked again she wasn't any boy. He thought of Coco, who would be expecting him in 'Frisco. He would have to send a telegram, telling him . . . telling him what?

He hadn't the faintest idea but doubted it would be anywhere near the truth.

"You've got to get him. I don't care how. Just get Buchanan!"

The widow wanted Buchanan dead or alive. Mostly dead.

Buchanan found it hard to believe. When he knew her years ago, she was just a ranch wife. A woman he scarcely noticed. Now her husband was gone and she had become the tyrannical ruler of the whole county.

She owned everything and everybody. And she bled them dry.
No one dared oppose her.
Except her son.
And Buchanan.
Now she had the whole town gunning for them.

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